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ACTION STORIES

OCTOBER
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TRADE MARK REG.

HERITAGE OF THE OWLHOOT TRAIL

by WALT COBURN

BRONCO GUNS

by JOHN STARR

RIDERS OF THE BOSQUE

by JED AGEE

THE DEVIL'S RANSOM

by A. R. WETJEN

THE LAUGHING SKULLS

by JACK SMALLEY

ACTION
STORIES

HERITAGE OF THE OWLHOOT TRAIL

by WALT COBURN

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ACTION STORIES



T. T. SCOTT, President and General Manager

MALCOLM REISS, Editor

A BIG COWBOY NOVEL

- HERITAGE OF THE OWLHOOT** **Walt Coburn** 3
Born bad, bred to the owlhoot, Dave Sandall fled his Cain-brand heritage. But who can hide from a six-gun destiny, or bury the ghosts of a loot-trail past?

TWO COMPLETE ACTION NOVELETS

- THE DEVIL'S RANSOM** **Albert Richard Wetjen** 64
Larsen of Singapore might be backed by the German Navy. He might be partnered by the Devil himself. But Heaven help him when he bucked Stinger Seave and Co.
- BOOTHILL ROUND-UP** **James P. Olsen** 112
Hard-case rannies no longer walked soft at mention of Dan Mono's name. For the Rattler was dead—his fangs pulled by a cool-eyed range queen.

SIX FAST-ACTION SHORT STORIES

- RIDERS OF THE BOSQUE** **Jed Agee** 35
Hunt your lairs, bandito wolves, for *El Tejanito* is riding your crimson back-trail.
- THE LAUGHING SKULLS** **Jack Smalley** 46
Caravans shunned that silent Afgan city and its strange, lynx-eyed white queen.
- BRONCO GUNS** **John Starr** 56
Tinhorn and trail boss. Once friends—but now they met gun to gun in the dusty street.
- RODEO WRANGLER** **Cliffe Manville** 85
Sande rode not for fame or money, but to kill the memory of a golden-haired dude girl.
- SIX-GUN MORTGAGE** **Don Stuart** 95
A lawman—but he gambled his name and his life on the faith of a Barlowe black sheep.
- THE RED HORSEMAN OF THE RIO** **Tom J. Hopkins** 103
Only the five who were marked for death could tell the *Tejano* what he had to know.

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The Tested WAY to BETTER PAY



Born bad, bred to the owlhoot,
Dave Sandall fled his Cain-
brand heritage. But who can
hide from a six-gun destiny, or
bury the ghosts of a loot-trail past?

HERITAGE OF THE OWLHOOT

A Novel of the Highline Trails

By WALT COBURN

FOR two days and nights now. Bull Sandall had been crazy from whisky. He had pulled off his boots and shaken out imaginary snakes. He had

moaned and screamed and cursed and sobbed through those horrible nightmares and waking hours of delirium tremens. He had tried to burn down the cabin twice.

He had made an attempt to kill himself. Now he crouched in a corner, his blood-shot, maniacal eyes staring at the boy, Dave, who was trying to act brave.

Bull aimed to do something. Dave had hidden the six-shooter and carbine and the sawed-off shotgun. He had cached every knife he could find. But there were hunks of stovewood that Bull could use to beat in his head. Bull was big and husky. He weighed about two hundred pounds and all of it was hard meat. Dave was a slim boy of fifteen. But he had Bull's six-shooter hidden under his faded flannel shirt.

"Fetch me my jug, yuh little rat." Bull's hoarse voice was a menacing growl.

Dave didn't move. The brown jug was there on the floor beside Bull's bunk, almost within reach of the crazy man's big hand. He was using that excuse to get Dave within reach. Then he'd choke him or beat him up, as he had a dozen times before. There were ugly blue bruises on Dave's throat and his body was marked and welted. Bull Sandall always beat Dave when he got drunk like this.

Dave had tried to edge toward the door, but Bull, with that devilish cunning of a madman, had cut off that means of escape. The boy was trapped.

"Fetch me that jug, you snivelin' little coyote."

Dave did not move. Under the healthy sun tan on his face, his skin was pale. His bloodless lips quivered with fear. But his hazel eyes showed brave little lights that no earthly fear could dim. He wondered if he'd have to use that six-shooter.

Now Bull reached out and got the jug. He pulled the cork with his teeth and tilted it upward. Now he drained the last drop of the moonshine whisky and hurled the jug at Dave. The heavy missile missed the boy's head by a scant few inches. Bull snarled at him for dodging.

"Coyote. Just a yellow-bellied coyote."

Dave crouched there, watching. It was just a matter of minutes now until he would have to use that gun or else be killed. Because Bull would be hollering for that other jug and the other jug was busted. Dave had dropped it when he was fetching it from the still. He had stumbled in the dark coming down the steep trail from the cave where Bull stilled his

corn likker. The jug had busted into smithereens. And there was no more corn.

Bull was a cow thief and a horse thief. He had killed a couple of men in drunken fights down on the Missouri River at the saloon at Crooked Creek crossing. Bull peddled whisky there and sold stolen beef to the prospectors who had tried to make a fortune placer mining. The placer gold was pretty well panned out now and Bull's business had fallen off. Winter was coming on and the pickings looked slim. So he had gone on a big drunk to celebrate hard times and now he was half crazy and as ugly as a wounded grizzly.

DAVE waited for Bull to make a move. Dave hated the big man with all his heart. He loathed the sight of him, he feared him, and he knew that he was going to have to kill him or else be killed.

Bull didn't know Dave had that six-shooter hidden under his shirt. The big man was coming toward him now. Slow-like, stealthy. Crouching like an animal about to spring. Inching his way toward the slim boy whose hand now felt for the hidden gun.

"Where's that other jug, yuh little sneakin' skunk?"

"What other jug?"

"The one y're a-hidin' on me. Drag it out."

"There ain't another jug." Dave's voice was a little unsteady.

"That's a lie. I'm goin' tuh break yore back. I'm goin' tuh take yuh and bend yuh backwards acrost the bunk till yore back cracks. I'll double yuh up like a jackknife. I'm a-goin' tuh kill yuh, yuh sneakin' little whelp."

Closer. . . Closer. Now he was almost within reach. Dave slid the gun from the waistband of his old overalls. Its blued barrel was steady as it covered the big man.

"Come a step closer," said the boy tensely, "and I'll have to kill yuh."

Bull Sandall picked up a stick of stovewood. His unshaven, heavy jawed face twisted in a crazy look. His bloodshot eyes were red slits.

"Stand back," cried Dave. "I'll kill yuh!"

A hoarse, rasping laugh. Bull lunged forward, hurling the stick.

The explosion of the big gun was deafening in the little cabin. There was the acrid odor of powder smoke.

Bull Sandall lay on the dirt floor, a widening crimson blotch on his chest. His eyes rolled back in under his heavy black brows. His mouth, ugly, twisting, heavy lipped, opened. Blood came in frothy bubbles from behind his set teeth.

"Kid. . . Yuh've killed me."

DAVE got a pick and shovel and the lantern from the barn. The ground was hard and it was slow work digging through the first sod, because it was half frozen and hard as flint. But Dave had dug postholes enough to savvy how to get down in the ground. Slim as he was, he had a wiry sort of strength. He aimed to bury Bull Sandall and then ride on out of Montana toward Mexico.

Dave wondered some about Bull Sandall. Bull was his old man. And while Bull had treated him ornery he felt that he owed Bull a decent kind of a burial. Bull had a horror about being buried in a shallow grave that the coyotes and wolves might dig up. When he was drunk, he'd talk about it a lot and shove a gun in Dave's belly and make the boy promise he'd dig his old man a deep grave. Then he'd make Dave pull off those boots and shake out the imaginary snakes. Like as not he'd hit the boy with one of the empty boots. But Dave figured that as long as he'd killed his old man, he'd plant him proper. If Bull Sandall wanted the proper kind of plantin', he'd git it.

Dave had a good sized grave dug by daylight. There were some pine boards that Bull had got to build a shed. There was part of a keg of eight-penny nails in the blacksmith shop.

Dave made a pine box that would hold the dead man. He dragged it over to the cabin. It was green lumber and Dave was sweating when he got it over there to the cabin door.

Bull Sandall was a heavy man. Dave wiped away the blood and tried to lift the stiffened body. But his muscles were not up to the task, it looked like he'd have to call for help. And the nearest neighbor twenty-five miles away. That nearest

neighbor hated Bull Sandall like a wolf hates a grizzly.

Dave went back to the barn and saddled a big roan gelding called Strawberry. He dragged the pine box to the open grave and slid it down into the hole. Then he rigged up a sort of shroud out of the bed tarp and dragged Bull's body to the grave. It took a lot of time and Dave had to man-age as best he could. He finally got the tarp-covered body into the coffin and was nailing down the boards on top when some men rode up.

"Plantin' corn?" asked the sheriff from Chinook, grinning down at the sweating boy in the open hole.

DAVE pounded the last nail home and crawled out of the open grave. His faded shirt and overalls were soiled. The big roan gelding stood there, bridle reins dropped. Dave looked up at the sheriff without a trace of fear.

"I had tuh kill the ol' man. I'm plantin' him."

"How's that again, son?"

"Bull went loco. I had tuh shoot him. He always was scared uh the varmints diggin' him up, so I made him a good grave and a coffin."

The sheriff from Chinook stepped down off his horse. There was a puzzled look in his eyes. Dave wiped the sweat from his face with a blue bandanna handkerchief that needed washing. He spat and spoke.

"Bull got on the prod. He was aimin' tuh kill me on account of the jug I busted. I shot him just above the briskit."

"Yuh mean, kid, that yuh killed yore father?"

"Yes."

The sheriff looked at the men who rode here with him. His face was grave.

"Open up that box, one of you boys. Two of you ride up and fetch down that still. Looks like we got a real job on our hands. Kid, where's the gun yuh used tuh kill yore old man?"

Dave motioned toward the cabin. "It's in there. But don't mess around openin' the box. He's nailed in there tight and solid. He was always talkin' about bein' planted deep. I done a good job, though it was mighty tough handlin' him."

The sheriff eyed Dave. There was

blood on the boy's clothes and hands. This was Dave Sandall, Bull's whelp. He had the name of being a bad kid. Packed a gun and could butcher a stolen beef with any man. Kids his age was sometimes as tough as a growed up man.

"Yo're under arrest, son. While Montana ain't mournin' the loss uh such a skunk as Bull Sandall, still murder is murder and yo're goin' into town with us."

"I aimed tuh go to'rds Mexico."

"Did yuh, now? Ain't that news?"

A man had slid down into the open grave and was starting to pry open the coffin. Dave leaped down on him, his face white with fury.

"Let that box alone. Git outa here."

The man snapped handcuffs on Dave's wrists and passed the sobbing, fighting boy up to the other members of the posse.

"Bull's whelp," grunted the sheriff.

"Chip off the old block. Set him on that roan geldin' and tie him to the saddle. That kid needs some trainin' and he'll git it in jail."

Dave cried and fought. They had opened the pine box and were examining the dead body of Bull Sandall.

"Shot just above the belly, Sheriff."

"Put the boards back on, then, and take this button into town. I'll wait here till the coroner comes. Keep a close watch on that kid. He's bad medicine."

Dave, his face white with anger, fought the ropes that held him fast in the saddle. He cursed the sheriff and his men with words that he had learned around cow camps. The men grinned at him good naturedly. They marked him for a tough youngster who would some day prove to be a dangerous man.

"I'll kill yuh fer this, yuh big buzzard," he snarled at the sheriff. "I'll kill yuh."

II

THEY tried Dave for the killing of his father. The boy had no money with which to hire a decent attorney. The State furnished him a lawyer. His name was Stearns.

Stearns had been drunk for ten or twelve years. He was a lanky, untidy man with hair that needed trimming. His nose was a large, purple affair. His small eyes were bloodshot and red lidded. Even

in his sober youth he had not been much of an attorney. Now, sodden with cheap whisky, his brain cooked in alcoholic fumes, he was both disgusting and pitiful.

Dave watched him with contemptuous eyes. The days he had spent in jail waiting trial had hardened the boy. He had been put in there with criminals who were all too willing to wise him up to many things. Now, defended by a rum-dum lawyer, he stood little or no chance of beating his trial.

He watched the jury of nine men and three women. He saw no mercy there as the State's attorney outlined Dave's reputation for toughness. He branded the boy as a potential thief and badman. He cited instances where Dave had been implicated with his late father in cattle rustling and horse stealing.

Dave could have told them that Bull had made him help. He made the boy pack a gun and drink and 'still whisky and butcher stolen beef. He taught the youngster how to put on a brand through a wet gunnysack or blanket so that the brand would look old. He taught him all kinds of orneriness and beat Dave if he learned slowly.

Dave might have stood a chance if he had been allowed to take the stand and tell how his father had mistreated him. But Stearns bungled the boy's case. He sat there in the courtroom, half drunk, sluggish in wit, without giving his young client any kind of a decent chance to defend himself.

Dave didn't know when he was born or what had become of his mother. He reckoned that he was about fifteen or sixteen, maybe. He hadn't any memory of a mother. Only of his drunken father, whom he had always hated and feared.

"He needed killin'," Dave cried out when he was on the stand. "I shot him. I ain't sorry and I'd be a-lyin' if I said I was. It was him or me and I killed him. And if the law puts me in jail fer it, then it is a hell of a law."

And he said a lot more.

Stearns tried to shut him up, but Dave was hot headed. He cursed the drunken attorney with words that brought hot blushes to the cheeks of the three women on the jury. He swore at the judge and fought the deputy who was guarding him.

Even if he stood any kind of a chance before, his burst of temper now condemned him.

"The kid has nerve, anyhow," said a cowpuncher. "If I was on that jury I'd stay by the button till them three females died uh old age. The yearlin' ain't had a chance. I bet that fool judge will just nacherally throw the whole book at the kid. Bet a hat the jury ain't out an hour."

The jury was out thirty minutes. The foreman of the jury announced that they had come to a decision.

Dave, steady eyed, straight mouthed, stood up to hear the verdict.

They had found him guilty of manslaughter. There was no doubt but what the judge would sentence him to prison.

"... from five to twenty-five years. You will serve the first part of your sentence in the State Reform School. When you become of legal age you will spend the rest of your time in the State's Prison at Deer Lodge."

Dave stood there, white around the mouth. His hazel eyes were hard, defiant.

"Have you anything to say, David Sandall?" asked the judge in a crisp voice.

"I got somethin' tuh say." Dave's voice was even toned, bitter. "I got this much tuh say. You and yore damned laws has made me into a outlaw. I'll never serve that stretch in the pen. I'll git out somehow and when I do I'll go the route. Tuh hell with you and tuh hell with yore damned laws. Take me outa here."

THEY took Dave Sandall back to his jail cell. He joked and laughed with the older prisoners. They called him a game kid and laughed when the deputy repeated what Dave had told the judge.

Stearns came into the jail to see Dave. The boy knocked him down and kicked him in the face. The jailer dragged the attorney, bleeding and moaning, outside.

"I shoulda killed the drunken louse," said Dave hotly. "That's the kind of a shyter they give me when I'm up on trial. That's yore stinkin' law."

That night just before midnight the deputy woke Dave up from a fitful sleep.

"Climb into your duds, Dave. We're takin' a train ride."

Dave put on his clothes. It was a cheap, ill-fitting blue serge suit the jailer had

bought him with money donated by the other prisoners. He wore a pair of store boots and a gray flannel shirt and a tie. His hat was one that had belonged to Bull. By stuffing lamp wicks in behind the sweatband he managed to wear it.

There was a game grin on Dave's mouth when he said farewell to his jail mates, who all woke up to tell him good-bye. But in the darkness outside on the station platform, while he waited for the train, hot tears stung his eyes. He was handcuffed to the big deputy. A choked sob escaped from his tight throat. He couldn't hold it back.

"What's the matter, Dave?"

"Not . . . not a damned thing. Let a man alone, can't yuh?"

It was Dave's first train ride. He and the deputy rode in the day coach. Once on the train, the deputy took the handcuffs off the boy. He felt silly being handcuffed to a mere kid.

The prisoners in the jail had taken up a collection and had handed Dave several dollars when he left. The boy woke up the peanut butcher and bought candy and gum and peanuts and some apples. The deputy dozed in the seat alongside the boy.

Dave filled up on the stuff he had bought. He asked if he could go to the lavatory and the drowsy deputy grumbled permission. He accompanied the boy to the lavatory and took a seat opposite the closed door.

He dropped off into a half-sleep. It may have been twenty or thirty minutes. Rubbing his heavy lidded eyes, he looked at his watch. Now he got up and pounded on the lavatory door.

"Come on outa there, kid. Yuh sleepin' in there?"

There was no reply to his summons. A look of anger and alarm drove the sleep from the big deputy's eyes. He tried the door. It was locked on the inside. It took him several minutes to get hold of the conductor who had a key that would open the lavatory.

It was empty. The little window was wide open. Dave Sandall had slipped out of the clutches of the law.

The wrathful deputy got off at the next station. He hired a horse and rode back along the railroad right of way. He was

still hunting for Dave the next morning, but without any success.

III

DAVE, crawling through the lavatory window, hung by his hands from the window sill. The train rushed through the black night. The wind roared in the boy's ears. The wheels clicked over the rails. Clickety-click. Clickety-click.

Below was blackness. The boy's nerves were like fiddle strings pulled too tightly. He wanted to crawl back into the safety of the coach. His heart pounded in his throat. Fear gripped him with a cold hand, crushing his breath. He hung by his hands, his feet groping in vain for a hold on the smooth side of the railway coach. Then, with a gasp like a drowning swimmer, his fingers let go.

Perhaps he screamed when he let go. There was that horrible fear of falling beneath the wheels of that rushing train. Terror gripped him.

With a terrific force he hit the ground. It was like being hurled from the mouth of a cannon. Face and hands torn by the cinders as he rolled over and over down the steep embankment. He rolled into a barb wire fence. His head collided with a post and he was knocked senseless.

It was breaking day when he regained consciousness. His head was splitting. Face and hands were cut and bleeding. His clothes were ripped to rags. But he was free. He started to get to his feet, then sank back on the ground with a groan. His right leg was broken just below the knee.

Dave lay there, his body bathed in cold sweat. He chewed on his coat sleeve to keep from crying out with pain. Then he crawled, dragging his broken leg, through the tall grass toward some willow thickets that lined the river bank a hundred yards or more away. That would be Milk River, he reckoned. If he could only make an Injun camp or some rancher's place. He'd make some kind of a dicker with them to set his leg and hide him out for a few weeks till he was able to go on.

He made the river bank and drank some of the cold water. Then he bathed his swollen leg in the water, hoping to ease that pain that made him sick to his stomach. He

fainted two or three times. The pain was getting worse. He was shivering from the cold, too. His old mackinaw coat was left on the train. It was cold and looked like snow.

He tried to set his leg but the pain made him vomit and he lay there on the ground, his head pillowed in his arms, teeth set and grinding to keep back the sobs that choked him. He was shivering from cold and yet the pain made him sweat. Things kept swimming in his eyes and going black. His leg ached and throbbed with pain.

IT was almost noon when the big deputy, following Dave's sign, found the boy there on the river bank.

Dave tried to grin, though his face was drawn and pale and his teeth were chattering.

"I'm licked, looks like," he managed to say.

The big deputy wrapped the boy in his overcoat and made Dave drink some whisky he had fetched along.

"That was a low down, ornery trick I pulled," admitted Dave. "You was white to me and I done yuh dirt. I had this tough luck a-comin' to me."

"Take another slug uh whisky, button. Then keep wrapped up in that coonskin coat. I'm goin' after a rig tuh take yuh into the hospital. Hang an' rattle, boy. You got guts."

"I'll tough 'er out," gritted Dave. "Take yore time goin' but hit a run comin' back. I'll manage."

Dave did manage. The big deputy came back with a buckboard and they loaded the boy onto a mattress and covered him with blankets.

At the hospital in town they set Dave's leg. His face and hands healed up quickly and the second day Dave began to enjoy hospital life.

"Gosh," he told the white clad nurse with the Irish eyes, "this is cleaner than anything, ain't it."

She had cheeks as red as an apple and her hair was black. "I'll have you scrubbed clean, Davy, if it takes all the scouring brushes in the place. Look at those hands. I'm going to cut your hair tomorrow."

She was the first woman Dave had ever talked to much. It took him a few days to get over being bashful when she bathed him

and took care of him. But she joshed him a lot and called him Jesse James and Billy the Kid and treated him like a cowboy would treat him. She had been born and raised on a cow ranch and was married to a cow-puncher, so she knew how to talk to him. In no time they were friends.

The doctor was a blunt-spoken old country doctor who always was chewing on a cold cigar. He joked a lot, too, and told Dave that he was making him a wooden leg.

It was the first kindliness that the boy Dave had ever found in life and it put a lump in his throat when the nurse put a vase of flowers on the white table beside his cot and when the doctor brought him a sack of apples. Even the big deputy, despite the fact that he had been raked over the coals for letting Dave get away from him, brought the boy candy and a mouth harp.

"That roan horse that belonged tuh Bull," Dave told the big deputy, "I won't be needin' him. He's yourn. You bin almighty white to me. I'll make yuh out a bill uh sale."

He liked the big deputy and the blue eyed nurse and the grizzled old doctor who poked his ribs. He was sorry when the time came for him to go to the reform school.

The red cheeked nurse kissed him square on his mouth and cried over him when he left. The old doctor blew his nose violently and swore softly. Hobbling along on crutches, Dave boarded the train with the big deputy who was taking him to the reform school to begin a twenty-five year stretch behind prison walls.

THOSE few weeks in the hospital were destined to be the only soft weeks that Dave Sandall was to know for a long time. When the big deputy shook hands with him and turned him over to the authorities there at the institution, Dave felt the return of that bitterness and hatred for the law.

At first he fought against this new discipline that shut him in behind high walls. He was kept in a cell like a jail cell. They watched him carefully. When he hit a keeper over the head with one of his crutches they treated him like a hardened criminal.

The day of reforms and inspections of State institutions had not yet arrived and

the "teachers" had rough means of handling unruly boys.

There was a heavy-set, bull-necked "teacher" who swung a three-foot length of rubber hose as a weapon when he did not use his fists. He beat Dave into insensibility twice the first two weeks the boy was there. Then another of his forms of punishment was the water cure. At other times he would string some youth up by his thumbs until only his toes touched the floor and let the victim hang there until he passed out. This burly red-haired man was known among the boys as "Big Red."

Dave had been there nearly two weeks, most of which had been spent in the solitary cell, when he met Hutch. Hutch was the oldest boy in the reformatory. A tall, well muscled youth with black hair and yellow eyes that the boys claimed could see at night. Hutch was the natural leader of the other boys. His was the criminal mind and he had all the craft and cunning and grit of an old timer. He was in on a highway robbery jolt that would end him up in State's Prison.

Hutch was a trusty. He worked in the commissary department and made side money grafting. Hutch sized up Dave, who was still limping around with a cane. Dave met the keen scrutiny of Hutch's yellow eyes and never flinched. He had been sent to the commissary for clean overalls and shirt.

"Got any dough on yuh, kid?" asked Hutch.

"No. Not a dime."

Hutch passed out the blue shirt and overalls. The shirt would be much too small, the overalls too large.

"These don't fit me," he said, shoving them back across the counter.

A nasty grin spread Hutch's mouth. "They're what you get, see? If you don't like it you'll get a crack on the jaw. How'd yuh like that?"

Dave looked at the yellow eyed Hutch, who was as large as a full grown man. He made two of the crippled Dave.

"You'll gimme the overalls and shirt I want," Dave said quietly, "or I'll climb acrost that counter and help myself."

Hutch leaped the counter with a snarl. As he swung at Dave the latter clubbed the bigger youth with his heavy cane. Hutch crumpled with a little groan. Dave climbed

across the counter and helped himself to overalls and shirt. Then he sat on the counter, his cane ready, and waited for the unconscious Hutch to come out of it.

Hutch stirred and opened his eyes, he rubbed the lump above his right ear. Dave grinned at him, balancing the cane for another blow.

"I'd fight yuh without it," he explained "only I got a busted laig that ain't well. Come at me and I'll knock yuh cold."

Hutch smiled grimly as he got to his feet. "You'll do, kid. What's your name and what's the rap you're takin'?"

"Name's Dave Sandall. I'm doin' a manslaughter charge." He had picked up the argot of jail cells and prisons.

"Manslaughter? Tough guy, eh? Who'd yuh croak, Dave?"

"My old man. I'd always knowed I'd have tuh git him some day. He was ornery. Drunk all the time. Beat me up a lot. Him and Big Red make a good team."

He shook hands with Hutch, who seemed to bear him no grudge. Hutch showed respect for the younger boy who had already killed a man.

Big Red came along the hall and glared in at the two boys. Then he walked into the commissary. Hutch treated him with careless indifference. Big Red borrowed a cigaret from Hutch while Dave picked up his shirt and overalls and hobbled out.

THE next day Dave met Hutch in the yard. "I'm tryin' to fix it for yuh to work with me in the commissary, Dave. It'll take time but I can swing it. I like your style, pardner."

"How kin yuh swing it, Hutch?"

Hutch dropped an eyelid down over one of his yellow eyes. "It takes a little dough, that's all. Money buys a lot here and I got some planted on the outside. Never mind how I get it, but I do. Fifty bucks at a crack. That's what good pals on the outside can do for a guy in here. I'm doin' time for highway robbery, see. And no dick has ever found my cache. Kid, play with me and we'll be settin' purty some day. Keep your yap shut. I'll handle Big Red and them others for yuh. And I'll bet a hundred dollars against that two-bit shirt you got on that we'll never do time in the Big House."

"Yuh mean we kin make a getaway?"

"Why not? When the time comes, we clear out. I need somebody that's game to string with me. Ever ride any?"

Dave grinned. "All my life. You ride?"

"I rode the rough string for the Bear Paw Pool when I was sixteen."

Big Red came along and they split up. Big Red didn't like to see anybody talking. The hour in the yard inside the high brick walls was supposed to be a recreation hour, but the guards always kept them moving along and no visiting was allowed. In a few years all this strict and unfair discipline was to be changed, but Dave was not to see those great changes come.

Dave took courage now after Hutch had talked to him. Big Red ignored him when he passed. Hutch moved away in the opposite direction. He saw Big Red catch up to Hutch. Saw something pass from Hutch's hand into the hand of Big Red. Some minutes later Big Red halted Dave.

"You go into Hutch's dormitory, kid. See you act pretty or I'll knock your ears off."

He moved on. Dave knew that Hutch had bribed Big Red. His heart warmed toward the yellow eyed boy who was to help shape his destiny. He reckoned he'd stick by Hutch.

That night after lights out Hutch crawled in under Dave's blankets and they whispered together for an hour. Hutch was outlining his plan to escape. He had two butcher knives he had stolen from the kitchen.

"Big Red will try to stop us if he gets wise, Dave. Case he does, we'll kill him. We'll have to kill him."

Dave, whose legs and back bore ugly, festering welts from Big Red's rubber hose, nodded grimly.

"If he gits in our way, Hutch, we'll shore carve him."

IV

THE night was dark. There was a twenty-foot drop from the window of the dormitory to the ground. The bars on the window had been cut by hacksaw blades, then wrenched apart by Hutch's big hands. They had made a rope out of their blankets. The other boys in the dormitory lay there pretending to be asleep though

they knew that Hutch and Dave were making an escape.

It was close to midnight, they reckoned. Big Red was on guard in the yard below. He'd have the keys to the outer gate. To get free, they had to go out that gate or else over the wall. Hutch, for nearly a year, had tried to find a way to get over the wall. But it was too high and too smooth to climb up. It would have to be the gate. A twenty-foot slide down the blanket-rope to the yard, chancing that Big Red would be asleep when they jumped him. Big Red packed a .45 six-shooter and a black-jack. He was big and he was tough.

"But," said Hutch, "he told me today he sat up nearly all last night in a stud game and he'll be two-thirds drunk tonight and mebbysound asleep. Still, he'll put up a fight. I'm his meal ticket here, kid. I'm the only payin' customer. . . . Listen, Dave, when you slide down the rope, stay there still and silent in the dark. I'll be down when you gimme the rope signal that you're on the ground. Just shake the rope and I'll slip down like a fireman on a greased pole. Then we take on Big Red. All right, kid, let's go."

Dave went down the rope hand over hand. It was dark against the brick wall and Dave's feet touched the ground under the cover of a black night that promised a snowstorm. He jiggled the improvised rope. Now Hutch came sliding down, hand over hand. The two stood against the wall in the blackness. Snow swirled in around the lighted yard. Big Red, wrapped in muffler and coonskin coat and four buckle overshoes and blanket lined canvas overalls, sat hunched against the wall beside the gate.

Hutch slipped Dave one of the two butcher knives. Now the two stood there, shivering a little in the cold, watching that huddled figure of the brutal Big Red.

"For six months," breathed Hutch, "that dirty son kept me in a lousy, stinkin' cell alone. The bread he gimme to eat was full of worms. The water was alkali water he'd fetch in from out of town. He was just shakin' me down for some dough. I still wear marks from his beatin's. He put me in the hospital five times. I've bin bribin' him for two years. Dave, if he kills me, promise me you'll do yore best to cut his heart out."

Dave nodded agreement to his friend. "I'll handle my end, Hutch."

BIG RED was half asleep. But it was too cold to sleep heavy and he came awake suddenly when Hutch rushed him. Big Red's gun hung on his overcoat pocket and Hutch's butcher knife was ripping through fur and flannel to the soft flesh underneath. Hutch was laughing. A crazy, bitter laugh. Now Big Red's gun began spitting fire. Hutch slashed the guard's wrist to the bone. Then his hard fist dropped the big man. Hutch pocketed the guard's gun.

It was over.

He grinned up at Dave from his kneeling position beside the bleeding and unconscious guard.

"He didn't believe in banks. I got his roll, kid. Here's his keys. Open that gate. Fast. Hell, they'll be after us in a . . ."

Dave unlocked the big iron gate. Now he and Hutch were running down the street. Behind them was the commotion kicked up by the crack of Big Red's gun. Hutch led the way down an alley. Then into a small barn. Two saddled horses showed in the light of the match Hutch held in his cupped hands.

"Pays tuh have friends on the outside, kid. There's a belt and gun hung on yore saddle horn. A carbine in the saddle scabbard. Meat and bread and whisky in the saddle pockets. Let's ramble."

They left town on a high run. Their horses were grain fed and hard. The night was black and stormy. They spurred down a side street and across country. Hutch knew the country. He had punched cows there and the darkest night ever made could not hide the trails from his yellow eyes. He kept twisting his head and looking at Dave, then looking back behind them.

"Nobody a-comin', Dave. Have a drink uh whisky?"

"If yuh don't mind, Hutch, I'll leave the bottle alone. My old man done enough drinkin' fer ten of us."

"All the more for me then. Let me have yore undershirt, will yuh?"

"Undershirt?"

"Yeh. Skin 'er off. Big Red sent a slug through my off arm and it's bleedin'. But he'll never pull another trigger."

"Yuh . . . Yuh got 'im, Hutch?"

"Ripped his belly wide open. Here's how."

A BLACKER, stormier night had never been made. No sheriff living could follow a trail in that black swirl of snow and wind. Dave and Hutch rode through the night, heads bent, cold and miserable, pushing their horses to a long trot.

That was the first night of many to come that they were to ride together with death trying to close in on them.

Two weeks later, on stolen horses, they rode into a Wyoming town in broad daylight during a heavy snowstorm. They left their horses at the hitchrack in front of a saloon. The blizzard swept street held no sign of human being, except some hurrying figure now and then, muffled in fur, beating his way through the storm on some important errand.

Dave followed Hutch into the saloon. They were both frost bitten and the warmth of the sheet-iron stove and a few slugs of whisky was plenty welcome. There was nobody in the saloon except the bartender and a drunken sheepherder who slept on the floor, his dog curled up beside him.

The bartender, an old cowhand, welcomed the pair with a bottle and a smile and careless, friendly talk. They thawed out at the stove, then buttoned up their fur coats.

"Leavin', boys?"

"Just puttin' ourselves back into circulation," said Hutch. "I'll take along a quart. So-long."

They walked down the street to a small bank. A gust of wind and snow followed them into the bank. There were two men in the bank and they looked at the two strangers indifferently. But their indifference was short lived.

Hutch and Dave were covering them with six-shooters. Both of the young outlaws were smiling grimly. Hutch's yellow eyes were dangerous.

"We need some green money, gents," said Hutch. "It's your ante. If either of you shorthorns tries any tricks, we'll gut-shoot yuh both. Make 'er fast."

Dave shoved the money in a gunny-sack, while Hutch kept the two bank men covered. In less than five minutes they were riding out of town into the blizzard. Heading eastward toward an old cattle shed

where they had fresh horses waiting. Riding at a long lope. The snow drifting to cover their tracks. They were headed for the Hole in the Wall country.

"Easy pickin's, Dave. I'll tell a man them two dudes was shore scared. Here, take a shot uh this likker. It'll warm yore belly."

Dave took a small drink. He hated the taste of the stuff, but it acted like good medicine on a day like this.

They found their change of horses and kept on going until night crept up on them out of the short twilight. Then they headed for the shelter of some scrub timber. They hobbled their horses and spent a long, miserable night huddled together in their chaps and fur coats, not daring to make a fire lest they attract the notice of some law officer. They ate cold bacon and biscuits and nibbled at the whisky. The snow drifted over them like a blanket. Now and then they got up and stamped their numb feet and slapped their arms around to restore circulation.

"Bet a hat my feet is froze," growled Hutch.

"My face shore is," added Dave, "and my hands is stiff."

"But we ain't in any stinkin' jail, kid."

"That's right, Hutch. We're free."

"We made better than five thousand in that haul. Fun money. Easy pickin's. Beats punchin' cows for forty a month and beans. We'll soon be rich as hell, Dave."

"Goin' at this rate, we'll have 'er made by spring. What'll we do with 'er all?"

"Hit a steamer and locate in South America. I got friends down there. We'll work for wages till we locate the right place, then we'll buy an outfit."

THEY pulled out at daylight. Toward noon they hit a line camp where a cowboy was feeding a bunch of cattle.

"We'd be willin' to help yuh shovel hay," Hutch told him, "but we're about ten jumps ahead of a posse. Here's twenty bucks for what grub we eat. If a law officer asks have we gone this way tell him we have and that it will be to his sorrow if he ketches up with us."

The cowboy was about Hutch's age. He grinned uneasily. He had heard about how outlaws killed men who talked too much.

"If yuh say so, they won't git a word

outa me," he told Hutch earnestly.

Hutch's yellow eyes glittered. "You tell the sons that we ate here. Tell 'em they better not crowd us too close."

Dave marveled at Hutch's boldness. Hutch talked tough and he acted tough. He had that cold, nerve steadied manner of a born killer. Though he admitted that Big Red was the first man he had ever killed, he had gone at it with a premeditated violence that awed Dave. Dave had killed Bull Sandall, his father, but he had killed in self defense. The killing of Big Red made the boy shudder a little. God knowed Big Red had treated them ornery, but to kill a man like that didn't seem right to Dave. He fought against that squeamishness with all his might, too. He had hired out for a tough hand and had said he'd play his string out.

From now on it was kill or be killed. But it looked to him like Hutch was aiming to carry the game too far. Hutch acted like he wanted to go out and kill men. His yellow eyes under the crooked black brows would take on a tigerish glitter when he talked about shooting men. Hutch was a born killer. Dave was not, and the boy wondered if he was yellow or if he was right.

Hutch talked mighty tough to this cowboy at the line camp. He kept hitting the bottle and telling the forty-a-month cowboy how bad he was.

"I never packed a gun," said the cowboy, when he had cooked a hot meal for Dave and Hutch, "I don't know just why, but I never packed a gun."

Hutch sneered at him as he ate the cowboy's beef and potatoes and bread and beans. Hutch had an ugly streak in him. He liked to taunt a man or beast and torment them. Now he was ribbing this lone cowboy.

"Never packed a gun? Scared yuh might have tuh use it I reckon. You're a hell of a sweet specimen tuh be follerin' the cow business. What you really need is a sheep hook."

THE cowboy's frost-bitten face paled. Hutch was making fight talk. But if he took up the challenge he might be killed. He stood there by the stove where he had cooked their dinner, his eyes narrowed, his lips clamped. Now he spoke.

"I don't know you, feller. You come here and I fed yuh. Now yuh try tuh pick a fight. Lay off that gun and I'll give you a whuppin' or take one."

Hutch sat back in his tilted chair. His eyes were slitted and deadly. His hand was on his gun. Now Dave knew that Hutch meant to kill this unarmed cowboy. He was out to build himself a rep as a killer and he was going to whittle notches on the gun he packed.

"You don't have to take a whuppin'," said Dave. "Hutch, you ain't hurtin' this boy while I kin stand in yore way."

"What do you mean, kid?"

"What I said. Yuh heard me. I ain't standin' by and watch a murder done. If yuh need a fight, I'll take yuh on. Fill yore hand."

Hutch, his hand on his gun, let the front legs of his tilted chair touch the dirt floor of the cabin. His yellow eyes now watched Dave. Dave had quit his chair and now stood by the table, his hand on his six-shooter. His hazel eyes did not flinch under Hutch's menacing scrutiny. He was not afraid. He knew that Hutch was fast with a gun and that Hutch, just now, was rearing to kill him. But he was not afraid.

"Why don't yuh draw yore gun, Hutch?"

Hutch's hand left the cedar butt of his .45. He grinned, though his eyes still glittered.

"We're pardners, Dave. I wouldn't fight with you for a million dollars."

"Then let this cowpoke alone, Hutch."

"I was only havin' some fun with him. Yuh take things too serious, Dave. You're the best friend I got. What we quarrelin' about, anyhow? We're pardners, ain't we?"

"I reckon we are, Hutch," said Dave slowly.

Hutch grinned and rose from his chair. "I was just hoorawin' the feller, Dave."

"Shore. Just like mebbysso I was hoorawin' you, Hutch."

The cowboy looked from Hutch to Dave. His eyes thanked Dave. When Hutch swaggered out the door into the storm, the cowpuncher held out his hand to Dave.

"I'm thanking you for my life," he said briefly. "If ever you need a friend ask in any Wyoming town for Jeff Hardin and somebody will be able to locate me. My

father owns one of the biggest cow outfits in the West. Will you shake hands?"

V

DAVE and Hutch rode on through the storm. Dave knew that back at the cabin he had left a man who had become his friend. Even as he knew that he now was the enemy of the yellow-eyed Hutch. Hutch was the kind that never forgave a quarrel, never forgot a grudge.

He'd have to watch Hutch from now on. That first quarrel at the reformatory commissary was still in Hutch's craw. Dave knew that. This second run-in settled it. Hutch was layin' to kill him now. It might be tonight or next year or ten years from now, but Hutch would be sure to try it. Hutch'd wait till the sign was right because, deep down in his killer's heart, he was afraid of Dave.

Dave watched him covertly as they rode into the blizzard. He saw that the yellow eyes were brooding and sullen. Hutch had been the big bully at the reformatory. He had been the king there. Younger and smaller boys had been made to pay tribute in some form or another. Dave had been the only one to defy Hutch. Dave reckoned that meebby-so Hutch had killed Big Red just to show the younger boy that he could be tough.

Hutch had rode broncs for the Bear Paw Pool when he was sixteen. He was tough and ornery. He wanted to be tough. He aimed to be as tough as any man that ever rode the outlaw trail. But he was afraid of Dave Sandall's cool courage. Dave knew that and he had the sense to know that a coward is always far more dangerous than a brave man. Hutch would kill him if he got the right chance.

On the other hand Jeff Hardin of Wyoming had become Dave's friend. He knew about the Hardin outfit. J. T. Hardin was a power in Wyoming politics. He could have been United States Senator, but chose not to take any prominent part in the political game. He liked the rough life of the cowboy and spent most of his time on his ranch. An old timer in that country, he was known all over the state. Jeff Hardin, old J. T.'s son, might some day prove to be a valuable friend.

Not that Dave cared much. Dave's way

was the crooked trail of the outlaw pack. He could not afford to make friends with any man. To ride with them, drink with them, rob with them, perhaps kill with them, that was one thing. But to make a friend of any man, good or bad, was not in Dave's manner of reckoning.

There was something about Jeff Hardin that made Dave admire him a lot. For one thing, Jeff Hardin had faced Hutch like a man. He hadn't crawled on his belly to Hutch, even when he figured that Hutch was aimin' to kill him. Jeff Hardin was no man's yellow bellied coyote. Like as not he had book learnin', too. J. T.'s son would have everything that money could buy. But still he was there at a lonely line camp eating beans and biscuits and beef and shoveling hay to pore cattle.

Old J. T. was worth all kinds of money, but it was money that he'd worked hard for. He had been up and down plenty many times. He had been broke and hungry and in need of a friend but he was worth a-plenty now. And it hadn't added onto the size of his hatband, either. He shaved when his whiskers got to itchin' and he wore the kind of clothes he was used to. And he was probably bringin' up his son along the same lines he had traveled. Jeff Hardin was all right. He was old J. T.'s son and a chip off the old block. But Dave figured that Jeff's trail and Dave Sandall's trail went in opposite directions. Jeff Hardin was the son of a big millionaire cowman. Dave Sandall's trail was the crooked trail to hell.

HUTCH squinted through the driving snow at Dave. There was an ugly grin on his mouth and his yellow eyes glittered like, the eyes of some predatory animal.

"You shoulda let me kill that gent back yonder, Dave."

"Why, Hutch?"

"There'll be a posse a follerin' us. They'll hit his camp and he'll put 'em on our trail."

"Think so, Hutch?"

"Listen here, kid, you can't play this game with white chips. You gotta go the whole route."

"He fed us, Hutch, I'd feel like a crawlin' snake if I killed a man that

had taken me in out of a snow storm and fed me."

"Yuh'd rather let him squeal on us and get us killed?"

Dave pulled up his horse. His hazel eyes looked almost gray in the storm.

"Hutch, we might as well settle 'er here. I ain't killin' men that never hurt me. I ain't killin' a man that ain't packin' a gun. That goes as she lays. If she don't lay good, try out yore luck. I take nothin' off you or any man. I'm in this game to the limit, but I reckon a man kin play this kind of a hand without murderin' men that ain't heeled. I'm as game as you are. If my way don't suit, let's settle the deal now. I'll fight yuh or I'll split the trails right here and now."

"Only for me, you'd be doin' time, kid."

"I'm rememberin' that, Hutch."

"We started out together. It ain't sensible tuh be janglin'."

"No, it ain't sensible, Hutch. I never started it. You done picked the argument."

"I reckon yo're right, Dave. Only I think somethin' of my scalp and I know that cowboy back yonder will squeal on us."

"What'll yuh bet?" grinned Dave, seeing Hutch's eyes lose their menace.

"A hundred?"

"Make 'er five hundred." Dave still grinned.

"Called. How'll yuh prove it?"

"You ride on, Hutch. I'll stay here on the trail somewheres and wait. If I don't show up at camp tomorrow you kin keep the five hundred bucks I'll give yuh now. If I show up tomorrow at noon at that cabin we're headin' for at the Hole in the Wall, you pay me back that five hundred and five hundred more. Is that fair?"

"Fair enough, kid. Only you kinda forget that we're in this hide and find game together. What kind of a damned skunk do yuh think I am to leave a man in a tight like that?"

This was an angle to Hutch's character that Dave had never seen. It was a part of the yellow-eyed Hutch's own queer code. Hutch was no doubt planning on killing Dave some time, somewhere. But he would not leave him to be killed by any posse. They were still a lot of miles from

the Hole in the Wall country. Between there and where they now sat their saddles was some dangerous territory to cross. Behind them was a posse.

"IF that's yore way of quittin' me, Dave," said Hutch, "you don't need to pay me off with five hundred lousy bucks. We started together. We are goin' to finish together. That bettin' goes, but if you stay here on the open trail, I'm stayin' with yuh. I'll collect when that fool posse ketches up."

"Yo're hurt, Hutch. Yuh need a warm place tuh sleep and a decent bandage on that bullet hole. I reckon we kin manage tuh find out if that cowboy double-crossed us. Somebody kin find out."

Somehow Dave could not help but liking this yellow-eyed killer. Hutch had been man enough to stick in a tight. That was something. A lot of gents would have let a boy take his chances alone. But not Hutch.

They rode on together. On through the blizzard that swept the country. Each of them kept a silent tongue. Twice they stopped and Dave wrapped new bandages around Hutch's wound. These bandages were cut from Dave's undershirt.

The dusk made travel hard in the storm. Both of the young outlaws were badly frost bitten and numb from the bitter cold. Just before dark they hit a deserted line camp and put up their horses in the log barn. There was grub in the cabin and plenty of wood. Dave built a fire in the stove and they cooked supper. The heat of the cabin stung their frost bitten faces and that bullet hole in Hutch's left arm was in bad shape. But there was no word of complaint from either. After the supper dishes were washed they sat around and smoked.

Hutch was uneasy and nervous and seemed to be listening for some noise outside the cabin. The blizzard was still on and the wind moaned like something alive.

"Expectin' company, Hutch?" asked Dave. He had been watching the other wonderingly for some time.

"There's a posse on our trail, kid, and don't let that fact slip out of your skull for one minute. There'll be men in that posse that know where this cabin is located.

"It'll be hard tuh find on a night like this. We're just as safe as if we was in jail. It's the fever in that bullet wound that's got yuh jumpy."

"If you'd let me kill that cowboy back yonder, we'd stand a show. But I tell yuh they're a-follerin' us. If they . . . Put out that candle, kid. They're comin'."

VI

OUTSIDE in the snow-swept night a horse had nickered. Another horse had nickered back. Hutch sloshed a pail of snow water on the fire. The cabin was now in utter darkness.

"Now," gritted Hutch "let 'em come. And I'll live tuh git back and shoot that blabbin' cowboy in the belly. You owe me five hundred simoleons, pardner."

Dave made no reply. He was gripping his carbine tightly, peering out through a hole he had scratched and dug out of the chinking between the logs. Hutch was crouched on the opposite side of the cabin, squinting out through a similar hole. The last faint red glow of the fire had showed his narrowed yellow eyes gleaming in the dark like the eyes of a panther. Dave wondered if Hutch really could see in the darkness.

A heavy bar had been slid across the door. They had the advantage of warmth over those men outside who were surrounding the cabin. Now Hutch moved a little. He had shoved the barrel of his carbine through his porthole. He jerked the trigger and from outside there came the quick, gasping moan of a man badly hit. Dave could see nothing in that black, snow-filled night. It was so dark that you couldn't see your hand in front of your face.

Now, from out in that black storm, there came a volley of shots. The one window in the cabin was smashed. One or two bullets ripped through the door. Dave shot at random, without hope of hitting anything. He could hear men calling to one another. Hutch fired deliberately. His gun was taking deadly toll. The wind moaned like a dirge.

Now some heavy object thudded against the door. Hutch and Dave emptied their guns at the door. They heard a man cursing heavily. The thudding impact

against the door quit. No doubt they had tried to use a corral pole as a battering ram.

Now a menacing voice outside shouted at the two young outlaws.

"You two might as well give up. There's plenty of us. We'll take yuh dead or alive."

"There's two of us," Hutch called back tauntingly. "We're nice and warm in here and we're fightin' on full bellies. How'd yuh like a good hot cup uh Java?"

"Yuh want us so bad," added Dave, "why don't yuh walk in an' git us?"

The possemen made a second terrific rush with their battering ram and the two outlaws riddled the door with slugs. Now Hutch whirled and shot at the window. A man outside screamed in agony.

"I think," said Hutch, "that I got that dude in the neck. That snow keeps me from seein' good."

"Kin yuh really see in the dark, Hutch?"

"As good as a tom cat, kid."

Hutch liked to blow and brag. Dave had never heard tell of any man who could see in the dark. Yet Hutch was picking off men in that inky blackness with the same accuracy he would have had in broad daylight. And now it suddenly came into Dave's mind that when Hutch got ready to kill him, it would be on a moonless night. Hutch would be sure to use his advantage.

THEY kept on shooting at the door, which was but a blurred shadow in the dark. The battering ram quit. There was a silence out there that was unbroken save for the moaning of wounded men.

"How do yuh like it out West," taunted Hutch, "as far as yuh bin?"

Now came that same voice from out in the storm. Only now all the menace was gone. No doubt the sheriff, for it was probably the sheriff, had realized the folly of trying to break into the cabin.

"You win, boys," he called out of the black night. "I got some wounded men out here. They'll die if they don't get out of this snow and in where it's warm. Any chance to make a dicker with you two fellers tuh let these wounded men in the cabin?"

"What do yuh take us for?" snarled Hutch. "Think we're carin' for a lot uh

law gents that is tryin' to kill us? Guess once more, Johnny Law."

There was a long minute of silence. Dave could hear the sheriff talking to his men.

"There's five men wounded," called the sheriff. "Let them come in the cabin with the doctor that's along with us and I'll give you boys my word that the rest of us will head back for town at daylight."

"Do you git that kind uh jokes out of the *Arkansaw Traveler*?" jeered Hutch.

"There's just about grub enough in that cabin," called the sheriff, "to last two men a week, even if yuh went easy on the bacon and beans and flour. Yore horses is in the shed. Supposin' I was to take them horses and set you two fellers afoot? I kin gather fifty men that will be plumb eager to foller yore sign and cut yuh down. Think that 'un over."

Dave and Hutch knew that the sheriff was telling the truth. The storm would cover the range with big drifts. It was still a long ways to the Hole in the Wall country. Afoot, plowing through those drifts and with a bunch of men surrounding you, that was a death sentence and nothing but.

"It's a horse on us, Hutch, looks like. Anyhow. I hate tuh hear them pore devils give up head out yonder. What'll we do?"

"Go out and cut their throats with that dull butcher knife there in the cupboard. We'll take our chances, kid. Don't weaken. Ever walked much?"

"Some. If they set us afoot, Hutch, we're gone goslins. You know that as well as I do. That gent has an ace in the hole."

"Kid," said Hutch grimly, "you'll never make a real tough outlaw. Yuh weaken too quick. Yuh git chicken hearted. We hired out for tough hands. Are you goin' to play yore string out?"

"I don't have any hankerin' to start out afoot acrost them snow drifts, Hutch. That's just downright fool's play. I'll play my string out along the lines I figger is good judgment. Yonder sheriff is puttin' us a fair proposition. If we don't take it, we're fools. Startin' out on foot acrost forty-fifty miles uh country in this kind uh weather might sound good to you but I don't cotton to the idea."

"Hell, kid, that sheriff is just tryin' tuh trap us."

"How do yuh mean, Hutch?"

"The minute we unbar that door, they'll charge us."

"I don't reckon it thataway, Hutch. He has men out there that's hurt and will shore enough die if we don't let 'em inside. If it was me, I'd chance it."

"Kid, you'll never git any place if yuh don't change your ways of thinkin'. A cop is always a cop. A sheriff is always a sheriff. They'll use every lousy trick they know to ketch a man. Tuh hell with those wounded gents outside. They took a chance and lost, that's all. They're just unlucky scalp hunters. Let 'em die."

Hutch's voice was harsh, cold blooded. Outside the wind whipped around the corners of the log cabin and drove snow through the broken window. The snow hit Dave's face and he crouched to one side, there in the blackness that was heavy with the choking fumes of burnt powder. He heard a wounded man outside begging for somebody to kill him. Dave's stomach felt like it was a tight knot. He wanted to help that poor devil outside that was begging for a gun. Hutch, crouched low alongside his peep hole, was whistling through his teeth.

Dave made up his mind then.

"Hutch," he said, out of that blackness through which his fellow outlaw's eyes could see, "I'm goin' to make some kind of a dicker with that sheriff gent."

"JUST what, kid," Hutch's voice cut through that black cabin like a knife, "do yuh mean?"

"Just what I said, Hutch. It's our one chance. If we don't take it, we'll be afoot in the middle uh nowhere with the snow belly deep to a tall camel."

"We'll be double-crossed, kid."

"We'll have tuh chance that, Hutch. It's our one bet."

Dave felt that Hutch's yellow eyes were studying him in the black cabin. He wondered if Hutch would kill him now. It was as good a chance as the yellow-eyed gun toter would ever get. Seconds seemed hours to Dave now as he waited for Hutch's reply.

"Kid!"

"Yeah?"

"You got a long head on yuh. I got just half a notion tuh gamble on yore hunch. You got a knack for figgerin' things out. But before we take the bar off that door, we gotta figger out a way tuh protect our bets. Got any ideas on tap?"

"One. I reckon it will be enough tuh stop any crooked deal. That window is busted, ain't it?"

"Plenty busted, kid."

"Then let the sheriff crawl through it. He'll give himself up before we let anybody in. If they try any tricks, we'll kill this sheriff. Does that sound solid?"

Hutch chuckled there in the dark. The sound of it made Dave shudder a little.

"Great stuff, kid. Holler out and tell Mister John Law yore proposition."

Dave called out to the waiting sheriff. When he had explained his idea, and when his final words had been whirled away with the storm, there followed a short silence. Then the sheriff's voice broke through the storm. It was a voice that a man would remember. Deep toned, drawling and unafraid.

"I'll just take you boys up on that deal."

"Then come ahead," called Hutch.

The sheriff broke away the sharp, pointed bits of glass on the window with the barrel of his Winchester. Now he crawled through from the outside. He stood there by the window, breathing audibly.

"Hold yore hands behind yore back," gritted Hutch.

"How can you tell where my hands are?"

"I kin, that's all," said Hutch, a tone of grisly humor in his voice. "Yore right hand is on yore gun. Yore left has a holt of the window sill."

"What kind of eyes have you got, anyhow?"

"Cat's eyes, Mister Law. You got on a buffalo coat and black chaps. Yore whiskers needs a razor. Your left-hand cheek is bleedin' some."

"You win," said the sheriff grimly. "My hands is raised. You boys has me foul. For gosh sake, hurry up and let them wounded men inside. That blizzard out there is a tough 'un."

Hutch's laugh was gritty. There came the dull crack of a six-shooter barrel

against bone. The dull thud of a heavy body hitting the floor. The metallic sound of handcuffs. Now Hutch spoke.

"He'll wake up directly, kid. I got him handcuffed to the bunk. Call out to them cheap sports that they kin fetch in their men one at a time. I'll fix a blanket over the window."

DAVE did as Hutch ordered. He hoped that Hutch hadn't hurt the sheriff too much. That sheriff was a game cuss, takin' a chance like that for the sake of some men who were hurt and needed attention. Dave's voice sounded a little husky and strained now as he called out through the broken window.

"We got yore sheriff under control. He's plumb safe until one of you gents start somethin'. Then he goes out like Nellie's glass eye. Fetch in yore hurt men one at a time. Try any monkey work and we'll kill the sheriff and some of you hide hunters."

"That," laughed Hutch, "is tellin' it to 'em in nice, purty, simple words. Kid, you got brains."

Dave wondered just how much of that Hutch meant. You could never tell when Hutch was being sarcastic and ornery.

"Open up the door, kid."

Dave slid back the heavy bar. He swung open the door.

"Come in with yore meat," called Hutch.

Dark shapes moved in the blackness. The snow swirled in through the open door. The man who had been begging to be killed was quiet now. It was the quiet rest of death. Dave hoped that it had bin Hutch's bullet that snuffed out the candle flame of that poor devil's life. The smell of fresh blood and powder smoke was sickening and Dave knew that he never would be, that he never could be the killer that Hutch was.

Yet he had started on the outlaw trail and he would have to ride it to the end. What that end would be was plain. A bullet, a hangman's rope around his neck. Even before he had begun to find out what life was about, he was condemned. He was wanted now, dead or alive. He had hired out for a tough hand and he would have to play his string out. He thought of that even as they carried in those men who groaned and swore at the

pain that was wracking them. He wondered if he, some day, would feel the hot bite of a lead slug and lie bleeding somewhere, torn with pain. He hoped that the bullet that ended him would be well aimed so that he wouldn't lie and suffer long.

One by one the five wounded men were carried into the cabin, the men who carried the wounded stumbling in the dark. One of the helpers fell and the wounded posseman howled with pain. Hutch laughed harshly.

"Where's your guts, law man?" he sneered through the darkness that only his yellow eyes could penetrate.

VII

THOSE men who were unhurt found a sort of shelter in the shed. They built a big fire and squatted around it.

Inside the cabin were Dave, Hutch, the manacled sheriff, five wounded men and the doctor. Hutch had disarmed every man that came in, whole or wounded, and had tossed their guns out into the snow-drift.

The sheriff lay on his side, his wrists handcuffed to a pole upright that ran from floor to ceiling as a support of the double bunk in the cabin. He was a gray mustached man with deeply tanned skin and blue eyes. He said but little as he lay there on the floor, helpless. There was, after all, little to say.

Dave made a fire in the stove and heated water. The doctor was a young fellow not much older than Hutch. He had an easy way with him and took things as a matter of course. Dave liked the doctor and helped him bathe and dress the wounds of the suffering men who lay on the floor. Hutch sat back in a corner, his yellow eyes brooding, his hands near his guns. He said nothing to Dave about the latter helping the doctor, but Dave knew that his outlaw companion took this act of decency as a sort of weakness.

The sheriff's blue eyes studied Dave and Hutch. He was a veteran peace officer and part of his job was to size men up.

"How did you know so certain that you'd be findin' us here?" Hutch asked the sheriff.

"I turned that if you two didn't make

this cabin, then you'd freeze tuh death somewheres."

"We come past a line camp," Hutch went on. "There was a cowboy there. Did he put you on our trail?"

"Yuh mean Jeff Hardin, I reckon."

"That's his name," put in Dave.

"We come past Jeff's camp, but we got nothin' out of him. I knowed you had passed that way and I asked Jeff which direction you'd gone. He said that he was right sorry, but I couldn't git no information from him. When I asked him why, he said that one of you two would-be outlaws had saved his life. I didn't ask him no more questions because I figgered Jeff wouldn't talk. Jeff Hardin never put me on yore trail. I know this country fairly well, havin' rode it for fifty years. I knowed yuh'd either be here or buried somewheres in the snow by mornin' if yuh missed the cabin in the storm."

"I RECKON," sneered Hutch, "that you'd lie, anyhow, to protect this Hardin gent."

"Protect Jeff Hardin?" A slow smile widened the sheriff's mouth. "Jeff don't need protectin' from such snakes as you, young fellow. Give Jeff a gun and he'll handle his own end."

Hutch nodded briefly toward the wounded men.

"We was two against yore whole damned posse. Neither of us got a scratch, but yore men look kinda bunged up to me. I reckon that proves we kin take care of our scalps. Yore Jeff Hardin could do as good, yuh think?"

Hutch grinned crookedly at the sheriff, his head nodding.

"I'm admittin' I don't know how you picked so many of us off. Luck, I reckon, or them nasty eyes of yourn kin see in the dark."

Hutch grinned crookedly. "It wasn't luck."

The sheriff's head must be hurting him, but he voiced not one word of complaint.

"I hope that some day," he said bluntly, "I git the chance to throw you in prison and lose the key."

Hutch's grin became a sneer. "How do you know yuh'll ever git outa this cabin alive?"

"I don't know. You'd be snaky enough

to do murder all right. Are you tryin' to build up a bad rep?"

"I aim to make a special job uh killin' sheriffs," bragged Hutch with that toughness of youth that wants to be known as a real gun-slinging bad man.

The boasting made the grizzled sheriff smile faintly. He was fully aware of the fact that this young braggart was a dangerous sort of character. Hutch had that heedless recklessness of youth. He feared few things and hid whatever fear he did have behind a grin and a snarl and a pair of yellow slitted eyes. Given the right breaks and Hutch would certainly become plenty tough. He would be treacherous and without mercy.

THE sheriff turned his gaze toward Dave, who was helping the doctor probe for a bullet in a man's back. Dave had a clean cut face. His jaw was firm, his forehead high, his eyes were steady gazing. Jeff Hardin had briefly related the incident at his cabin when Dave had saved him from being killed by Hutch.

The sheriff was a man with grown sons of his own. He thought to himself that this young outlaw had the makings of a man if he had been given a chance.

Dave bathed the ugly wound in the suffering man's back. The poor devil lay there gritting his teeth and wincing when the probe went into the bullet hole.

Now Dave, wearing a pair of rubber gloves the doctor had made him put on, was handling a small, shiny instrument. Sort of a clamp or long pointed pliers.

"All right now," said the doctor to him. "Just be ready when I get this. . . . That's the ticket. Good work. You'd make a surgeon, my outlaw friend."

Somehow Dave felt all warm inside at this bit of faint praise. Now he and the doctor were bandaging and fastening pads of gauze and dressings with strips of adhesive.

"Yuh'll be goin' in for preachin' next, kid," sneered Hutch. But Dave paid him no heed. He was peeling off the rubber gloves and getting the blood off his arms. The doctor was giving the wounded men hypodermic injections to ease their pain.

Dave had been fascinated by this work of caring for wounded men. He wished that he was that cool, pleasant-mannered

young doctor who, despite his youth, was so efficient.

The sheriff asked for a smoke and Dave rolled him one. The veteran peace officer thanked him.

"Quit herding with that young snake there," he told Dave, indicating Hutch, "and you might turn out tuh be a man and do somethin' besides pull a gun trigger."

Hutch snarled something under his breath. Dave shook his head.

"Can't quit now, Sheriff. No turnin' back now. I'd a heap rather be killed then serve that twenty-five-year stretch that they handed me. I aimed tuh go straight. But damn 'em, they won't give a kid a chance tuh try his hand. I'll string my bets with Hutch."

VIII

AT dawn the posse quit the shelter of the shed and rode away. They had brought but little grub and so they started out empty and cold and uncomfortable, though the storm had let up and the sun was trying to break through a gray sky. Dave saddled his horse and Hutch's. Hutch unlocked the hand-cuffs that had rubbed the sheriff's wrists until they bled.

"Yore posse has gone. There's a dead stiff there in the shed that they left behind. Try to foller us and it will be to yore sorrow, not ours. So long."

"I'll land you behind the bars yet," promised the sheriff. Hutch leered at him, his yellow eyes mocking this old veteran of the law trails.

For a long moment the old sheriff and the young outlaw eyed one another. Then Hutch backed out the door, his hand on his gun.

"Come on, Dave," he said to the younger outlaw as Dave stood there in the cabin.

The doctor held out his hand to Dave. "I won't forget how you helped me. I'd have been badly handicapped otherwise."

Dave shook hands awkwardly. He hated any sort of demonstration like that. It made him feel foolish.

He had started to follow Hutch when the tall sheriff halted him with an outstretched hand.

"Sorry, son, that yuh started off on the wrong trail. I hope I'll never have tuh

swap shots with yuh. If ever a play comes up that you kin quit this game, do so. The best yuh kin expect is the worst of it. Ask the oldest old timer yuh meet up with when yuh reach the Hole in the Wall. See what he says."

"Say, cut out this damned sermon stuff," snarled Hutch. "What do yuh think this is, a church? Come on, Dave, or else stay here and let the law take yuh back and throw yuh in a solitary cell and feed yuh on dry, mouldy bread and water. Let's be draggin' it, kid, or else let's split here."

"I'm comin', Hutch, but I ain't comin' till I git ready. You ain't my keeper."

Hutch stepped outside and into the saddle of his waiting horse. He sat his horse with an admirable ease, though the big gelding was humped up and snuffy. Now the horse sank its head and with a squeal, commenced pitching. Hutch, grinning, rode him easily. He raked the buck out of the big gelding and came back at a trot.

Dave left the cabin and mounted his horse. Dave's horse was more gentle and made no attempt to buck. He looked back over his shoulder at the cabin they were leaving. He saw the sheriff standing there in the doorway. Dave saw him wave and waved back. Hutch noticed the exchange of greetings and sneered in an ugly way.

"Yuh fergot to kiss the John Law good-bye, kid. Hell, you'll never go the route, the way yo're actin'."

"No?" Dave smiled a little. When he smiled his eyes puckered a little. "Think not, Hutch?"

"Not if yo're goin' tuh be throwin' in with the law. The big gents we'll meet at the Hole in the Wall wouldn't treat yuh so good if the story was to git out that you and the sheriff back yonder is pardners. Hand shakin' and so on, and that he's reformin' yuh. Know what they do tuh a man they think is too friendly with the Johnny Law folks?"

"Quit beefin', Hutch. You know I ain't any dirty stool pigeon that will turn a man in to the law. Forgit it."

"They'd kill yuh in a second if they thought you was around nursin' wounded law men and shakin' hands with sheriffs."

"Then," said Dave grimly, "I reckon they'll have to kill me."

Another something to add to the breach between Dave and Hutch. Hutch acted sullen and they rode for hours without talking. They were traveling as fast as the drifts permitted. The country kept getting rougher.

LATE that evening Dave and Hutch made the Hole in the Wall. Hutch had certain messages that passed them into that colony of hunted men. Here was safety from the law.

Hutch looked up a man he used to work with when he broke brons from the Bearpaw Cattle Pool in Montana. The cowpuncher greeted Hutch with a reserved sort of manner. He shook hands with Dave and they had some drinks together from the cowpuncher's jug, then got supper. Dave thought that this ex-cowboy didn't care any too much for Hutch. Still, you never can tell. Sometimes the man that falls all over you tryin' to show how good a friend he is, will be the man that will shoot yuh where yore suspenders cross. The quiet kind are more likely to mean what they say.

They met other men there at the Hole in the Wall. Cold-eyed, grim-lipped men who talked but little and watched the two youthful outlaws with eyes that were a little suspicious.

Dave was the youngest of the outlaws who were there now. He felt like a kid and they treated him with an indifference that made him feel out of place and awkward.

He was worn out and sleepy, but he reckoned it would look like he was a weakling if he said anything about it. He wondered where he would locate a bed.

Hutch was getting drunk. He was in a stud poker game with some gents. For all his pretence at sophistication and toughness and his boasting about what a slick gambler he was, Hutch was losing. Dave reckoned that mebbysso Hutch was too drunk to know his cards good.

Dave sat in a corner alone, reading an old magazine by the light of a smoky lamp. He felt alone and isolated. These were all grown men, hardened to every bit of the outlaw game. They drank whisky and gambled and cussed and told some pretty bad stories and bragged about women they had known here and there

between the Argentine and the Klondike. Their talk was coarse, their habits free and loose. But Dave was not unused to all this. Back home his old man had trailed with a tough gang. Bull liked cards and whisky and the women of the dance halls.

Dave was finding nothing new in the way of wickedness here. But his youth shut him away from the older men. He was just a kid, an unlicked cub. They were men. Tough men. Men who had been all over the country. Alaska or Mexico were alike to these men who drifted up and down the outlaw trail. They were men who had killed and robbed. They were actually tough. While Dave felt himself just an outsider, uninformed here, unwanted.

Once they had supper and Dave had washed the dishes, Hutch had plumb ignored him. Hutch, flushed with vain pride at this first contact with seasoned outlaws, seemed to forget all about Dave. Dave could hear Hutch brag about knifing Big Red at the reform school and holding up the bank. He bragged about their fight at the deserted line camp and how many men he had shot.

THE older men listened to Hutch's drunken bragging and said but little. The jobs they had done, the men they had killed, they made no mention of. They had seen others like Hutch. Perhaps, not so many years ago, they had also talked as Hutch was talking now, spilling a lot of bragging talk so that he might be accepted into this nameless fraternity of the damned. Hutch talked on. They listened. Now and then a pair of eyes slid a cold glance toward the corner of the bunkhouse where the beardless boy Dave sat sleepily with his battered magazine.

A big man with grizzled white hair and a white stubble of beard on his big square jaw, cashed in his chips. Dave had noticed that this big man whose name he had not heard, neither drank nor smoked. He sat there at the poker table, a match in a corner of his mouth, his steady black eyes missing nothing.

The big man swapped his chips for cash from the big one-eyed gent who was running the game. He pushed back his chair

and left the game. He walked over to where Dave sat. He looked down at the boy with the unfathomable black eyes that were partly hidden under the heaviest iron gray brows the boy had ever seen.

"Ain't it about yore bed time, young feller?"

Dave met the big man's scrutiny. "I reckon it is. I ain't much of a hand tuh set up late."

"Hm-mm. And how many men did you help yore pardner kill?"

Dave felt his face getting hot. "I don't know. I reckon Hutch done most of the killin'. It was plumb dark and snowin'. But Hutch kin see in the dark."

"Better have a little nip at the jug, son."

"I . . . I'd a heap rather not. It makes me feel silly. I ain't much of a hand tuh drink. The old man kinda sickened me on the notion"

"He preached at yuh, yuh mean?"

"No, sir. He used tuh make me drink till I couldn't stand on my feet. Then he was always thinkin' there was snakes in his boots. When I busted a jug, the last jug uh likker he had me 'still, he come at me and I had tuh kill 'im."

The big man sat down on the edge of a bunk. "Tell me about it, button."

Dave saw that heavy square face smile and found himself smiling back. Then, warmed by that smile, Dave talked as he had never before talked to any man in his life. He told about those pinched, bitter, terrible years with his old man. How his old man had taught him to be ornery. How he had made Dave steal and make whisky and lie. How, when his old man was dead, he had aimed to ride that roan gelding into a new life where he could get a job with some cow outfit and lead an honest life. Then they had given him twenty-five years in prison.

Dave told how he met Hutch and how, they had broken out of the reform school. Then about the bank robbery and the fight in the cabin. About the doctor and the sheriff and how Hutch had taunted him for being weak. Especially when Hutch had wanted to kill Jeff Hardin.

The big man chewed on his match and listened. His black eyes watched the boy's every expression. And when Dave was done talking they sat there for a long time without talking. Hutch was winning

a little now, over at the stud game, and was still bragging.

THE big man jerked a thumb toward the poker game. "Aimin' to keep on with that kid Hutch?"

"There ain't anything else tuh do, far as I kin see."

"He'll hang some day if he don't git shot. Yuh say that sheriff advised yuh tuh go somewhere and start different?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why don't yuh?" came the blunt question.

Dave looked at this big outlaw whose name he did not know. He met the big man's question squarely.

"It's too late. There's too much on the law books against me. I gotta play my string out."

The big man smiled as if he were recalling some far-distant memory.

"What's yore name, son?"

"Dave. Dave Sandall."

The big man's black eyes narrowed a little. He was looking hard at the boy now.

"Sandall," the big man mused aloud.

"Dave Sandall. I once knowed a man named Sandall. Bull Sandall, they called him."

"Bull Sandall was my old man."

The big man's face was stern looking and hard. His eyes studied Dave.

"It was Bull Sandall that you killed, Dave?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"He let you think that he was yore father?"

"I never thought no different. I reckon he was my father."

"Bull Sandall wasn't yore father. Yore father was a cattleman down in Texas. His name was Hearne. He was married tuh Bull Sandall's sister who was as fine a girl as ever lived. She died uh some kind uh pneumonia and Bill Hearne was left alone with a three-year-old kid. Bill was well fixed down yonder in Texas. Had plenty cattle and land and was doin' good till he gits into a wrangle over some leased range. Him and another cowman git into it and Bill Hearne shoots him. A jury convicts Bill Hearne and he draws a life sentence. So he deeds his ranch over to his brother-in-law, Bull Sandall, and

makes Bull swear he'll handle the layout for him. He likewise makes Bull Sandall promise he'll always look after his baby boy whose name is Dave.

"Bill Hearne broke jail the night they was to take him to the pen, but a sheriff's posse cut him down. Bill was killed just outside of town as he was ridin' away. Which leaves Bull Sandall owner of the Hearne ranch and guardian of young Dave. Seems like Bill Hearne fixes it so that Bull Sandall is supposed tuh turn over the outfit tuh you when you are eighteen years old. And meanwhile he draws a salary from the estate. But she didn't work out that way.

"Bull gits him a sharp lawyer and busts that document. He sells the ranch and takes you and pulls out. The only reason he takes yuh is because there'll be more money comin' to yuh when you are twenty-one. That's why he always kept you. And mebbys he had it figured that if it could be proved in court that you was ornery, they'd appoint him guardian over this second bunch uh money that is a-comin' to yuh.

"He makes yuh steal and drink and raise hell in general so that some day, when yuh 'come of age, he kin cash in on this second money, which is a heap more than the first money you git when yo're eighteen. I reckon Bull Sandall blowed in every dollar he got out of it. Whisky and a deck uh cards and a woman somewheres. That was always Bull's way. He was a high roller.

"When you killed him, yuh did this world a good turn, Dave. And it shore is tough that them fools couldn't see it thataway. But don't keep on like this. There's a chance you kin make things come out all right. Where's the money yuh stole from that bank?"

"In my pocket."

"All of it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Hand that all over tuh me. I'm goin' tuh send every dollar of it back tuh that bank."

IX

DAVE handed over the money without a question. There was something quietly compelling about the big man's

manner. He smiled at Dave and put the money in his pocket.

"Puttin' back that money, Dave, and lendin' Jeff Hardin a hand thataway, and helpin' out them wounded men, all that is goin' tuh help yuh later. It might be that J. T. Hardin kin do somethin' for yuh up in Montana so that they'll give yuh a new trial. J. T. has plenty influence and he'll go through hell for a friend."

"But I ain't his friend."

"Yuh saved the life uh his son Jeff. If anything ever happened to Jeff, old J. T. would just nacherally die. When Jeff tells him how you acted, that old bow-legged son will shore be rearin' tuh help yuh. Son, you don't belong here. Yo're a-goin' tuh quit it. Yo're a-goin' tuh quit that yaller-eyed kid that's gamblin' and drinkin' yonder. Yo're goin' tuh git a square chance."

Dave sat there, his face grave, his eyes a little misty with a new hope. He was already sick of this outlaw game. He wanted to get away from Hutch and all that Hutch meant. But he was wondering why that big outlaw was going to all this trouble to help him. The answer to that came as if the man had read Dave's thoughts.

"Yore father, Dave, was one uh the best friends I ever had. I reckon I kin say he was the best. He helped me out once when not another human in Texas or north uh Texas would lift a finger tuh help me. And if I kin help Bill Hearne's boy, then I'll figger that I've done just a little somethin' to'rds payin' off that debt tuh him. So I'm sendin' yuh yonderly, Dave."

"How do yuh mean?"

"There's a place in Arizona where you'll be plumb safe. Yore name is Dave Hearne from now on. Where yo're a-goin' there will be real folks tuh look out for yuh. It's yore chance tuh make a man outa yoreself. I knowed when yuh come into the Hole that you wasn't our kind. Yo're too much of a kid and yo're too much of a white man, Dave. So that's why I'm passin' yuh along the line to where some real folks will take care of yuh and see that yuh make out all right."

"I can't quit Hutch."

"No? Why can't yuh, Dave?"

"Because we started out together. I

know he ain't the kind of a pardner tuh have, but we started out together and it looks like I'll have tuh stick with him."

"Meanin', Dave, that yo're scared uh him?"

THE big outlaw wondered, perhaps, just how the boy Dave would react to that. Would he get mad or would he try to excuse the cowardice he was being told was in his make-up.

Instead, Dave just grinned and shook his head.

"No, sir, I don't reckon I'm exactly a-scared uh Hutch. Some day I figger that Hutch will try tuh kill me. And when he does, it'll be me or him. No, I ain't scared uh Hutch. But we started out together and it is kinda up tuh me tuh stick with him, that's all."

"We'll talk it over tomorrow, Dave. When yuh git sleepy, crawl into that end bunk yonder. We better be hittin' the hay, I reckon. A growin' boy needs his rest."

The big man started to pull off his boots. He had told Dave to sleep in the bunk across the aisle of the long bunkhouse. Now came an interruption that was destined to change Dave's viewpoint. An abrupt interruption that was to start the boy on a trail he had never hoped to make tracks upon. The trail suggested by this big unknown outlaw who was now pulling off his second boot.

For Dave's own particular code demanded that he stand by Hutch. He had turned over to this big stranger every dollar he owned. His pockets were empty. But still he felt that he could not quit Hutch because Hutch had got him out of the reformatory. He owed his freedom to the yellow-eyed youth yonder.

Now Hutch slid back his chair. His face was twisted into ugly lines and his yellow eyes were bloodshot and a little insane. He spilled his tin cup of whisky on the floor and threw the deck of cards across the bunkhouse.

Dave saw that Hutch was drunk. Drunk as a man can be and still be able to walk and talk.

"I'll . . . I'll be back," said Hutch, and he ripped at the collar of his heavy flannel shirt.

"Take yore time goin'," said one of the card players, "but kinda hurry back."

"With more money, button," put in another man.

"I'll be back," said Hutch gruffly.

"That'll shore make the game more interestin'."

Hutch glowered at the man who spoke but he made no move to accept the slur. Instead, he lurched unsteadily across the bunkhouse floor toward where Dave sat pulling off his boots.

Dave looked up at him without changing expression. He saw that Hutch was drunk. Blind, crazy, stupid drunk.

"Come on to bed, Hutch."

"Bed, hell. Gimme some money."

"Come on, Hutch. Git tuh bed. Yuh need a lot uh shut-eye. Lemme pull off them boots."

"Touch them boots," snarled Hutch, as he sat down on the edge of the next bunk, "and I'll kill yuh. Gimme some money. Gimme that five hundred I paid yuh on that bet."

"Aw, hell, Hutch, forgit it. Yuh lost that money to me fair. Be a sport."

Hutch's yellow eyes hardened. "Listen kid, I ain't welchin' on that bet. I want five hundred bucks tuh set back in that game. I'll pay yuh back. I'll split with yuh, half and half, when I win. Come on, kid, gimme some dough."

"Nothin' doin', Hutch," said Dave.

THROUGH the smoke-laden room the older men watched this quarrel between the two young outlaws who had come into this haven for hunted men. There was the odor of tobacco and whisky. The soft click of poker chips in the hand of a nervous gambler. The stud game had stopped and every man there was waiting to see what would happen.

"Gimme money kid."

"I reckon not, Hutch. Come on tuh bed."

"Scared I'll beat yuh out of a few lousy dollars, are yuh? Listen, kid. Git this all. I'm drunk and I don't give a damn who knows it. I'm travelin' the route and stoppin' nowhere. You and me started out together. Only for me, you'd be makin' horsehair bridles in the pen. I sprung you outa stir. Deny that."

"Nobody is denyin' that, Hutch. Come on tuh bed."

"Shut up. Damn yore hide, kid, I got a mind tuh gut-shoot yuh right here. I git yuh outa that damned reform school. I put yuh onto the ropes. I git yuh in here when yuh hang back slobberin' all over a lousy sheriff and his posse. Who shot them five bums, huh? Not you, because it was too dark tuh see. Who bumped off that sixth gent? Me. I done the shootin' and yuh lollygag over them wounded cops like they was kinsfolks. A hell of a tough gent yuh are, ain't yuh?"

"I spring yuh outa stir. I frame the bank stick-up and tell yuh how tuh work. I bring yuh here to the only place yo're safe. And now, for a few lousy, dirty dollars, yuh turn me down like I was a white chip. We quit right here, savvy, you and me."

"That," said Dave, his lips tight and his eyes glittering, "suits me. But before yuh go on, lemme tell yuh this. What I owe you, I'll pay 'er back."

"Then gimme some money."

"I ain't got a dollar, Hutch."

"Yuh what?"

"I'm as broke as you are, that's all."

"It's a damned lie."

"Don't say that over, Hutch, or I'll make yuh fight."

"Where's the money yuh had when yuh come here, then?"

"I'm sendin' 'er back to the bank, Hutch."

"Sendin' it where?"

"Back where we got it. Back to the bank we stuck up."

"Yuh gone loco?"

"No."

"Listen, button, don't try any fool game on me. I ain't in any condition tuh bat around fool jokes. Gimme some money. Gimme 'just about five hundred. I'll run 'er up into a bankroll, kid. Cut out this monkey work. Gimme some money."

Hutch's tone was half wheedling, half belligerent. Dave watched his gun hand.

"I told yuh I was broke. That's the truth. I'm sendin' mine back to that bank."

"Just a dirty little stool pigeon, weak livered coyote, are yuh? Just a little sneak, eh?"

"Better not say much more, Hutch," said Dave tensely.

"Why not, yuh coyote?"

"Because yo're talkin' fight talk. I'm takin' it because yo're drunk. Otherwise I'd make yuh back yore play."

"I'll back what I say, yuh punk. And when I'm done I'll take that tight money outa yore pockets."

"I don't think yuh . . ."

THE door of the bunkhouse was suddenly kicked open. A man stood there, a tall, fur-coated man whose black Stetson was pulled across his eyes. He had a six-shooter in his hand. His face was heavily bearded.

A hush fell over the place. Hutch, unsteady on his feet, leaned against the bunk opposite Dave, his yellow eyes fixing a bleary gaze on the newcomer.

The men at the poker table quit looking at Hutch and Dave. They eyed the fur-clad newcomer with eyes that were cold and menacing and suspicious.

Every eye was on the stranger who stepped inside and closed the door with his foot. Out of the hairy face glittered a pair of pale gray eyes. His gun was cocked.

"You there, Hutch," his voice rasped. "I want yuh."

Hutch recoiled as if struck across the face with a rawhide quirt. His face went white. His yellow eyes stared at the man who stood there just inside the door.

"I was told you was here. Hutch. So I come. I'm goin' to kill yuh. Fill yore hand."

"Gosh Pete, yuh wouldn't . . ."

"Pull that gun, yuh sneakin' rat. Yuh double-crossin' young skunk. I helped yuh outa that reform school, then yuh turn me down cold. I'll kill yuh now. Fill yore hand."

Hutch's drunken eyes were sobering. His face looked mottled under its spots of black frostbites and dirt. Dave, watching him with a swift, sidelong glance, thought Hutch looked like one of these circus clowns whose pictures he had seen on the bill-boards. Dave smiled a little. Hutch, with his face gone pale, his nose and cheekbones bitten black by the frost. Like a clown. . . .

Now he saw Hutch's hand slide across the butt of his gun. Saw the hammer of that gun caught in a broken place in the gun scabbard. Hutch was in high water

this time. That man called Pete had him foul. In another split second he would . . .

DAVE'S gun spewed fire. The man in the fur coat spun half way around as his left hand closed over a smashed right wrist. He was cursing. He dropped on one knee to pick up the gun that had fallen from his right hand when Dave's bullet crashed into it.

Dave leaped forward. In three jumps he was there beside the man. He kicked the gun under a bunk. The pale gray eyes of the man called Pete were fixed on him, cursing him mutely.

Now the drunken Hutch had untangled his gun and was thumbing back the hammer. He walked weavily toward the wounded man, who had gotten to his feet. A few paces from the man called Pete, Hutch halted.

The room was still as death.

The color had come back into Hutch's face. His mouth sneered. His eyes glittered.

"My turn now, Pete." His voice was a taunting challenge.

For a fraction of a moment the pale gray eyes of the man Pete looked at Dave. Dave read the message of hatred there. The message of despair. They were the eyes of a man about to die. And those pale gray eyes were blaming Dave for his death.

Hutch cocked the gun in his hand. His muscular body was crouched like that of an animal. His voice, when he spoke, was a hissing, deadly snarl.

"And so I lose you, Pete. We'll meet in hell, perhaps. Reckon so?"

"Pull the trigger, yuh skunk. Watch a real man die."

"I wanted to give yuh time. Pete, tuh think over yore sins. Got any message for them yuh leave behind?"

"Pull the trigger, skunk."

"I'll bust yore skull wide open with a good old .45 slug in one unholy second, you Hutch kid, if yuh don't drop that gun. And when ol' Towhead speaks, he says what he actually means."

The voice came from the big outlaw who had pulled off one boot. He sat on his bunk, half dressed, a blue yarn stocking cap on his head, a long barreled six-shooter in his hand. His tone was un-

ruffled, his face pleasant to look at. But there was sudden death in the careless way he held that old cedar-handled gun.

X

HUTCH shifted his yellow-eyed gaze toward the big outlaw. Dave was on his feet now, his gun in his hand. Half a dozen other guns were out, ready to spit fire.

It was Dave who broke that tense silence. He stepped toward Hutch slowly, his gun in his hand.

"Hutch," he said bluntly, "right here and now is where you and me quit. We split the blankets right now. What I owed yuh, I done paid off when I kep' that Pete feller from killin' yuh. We're quits."

"That shore enough suits me," said Hutch huskily.

"Don't never try tuh hunt me when I leave here, Hutch."

"Don't worry about that. You kin go plumb tuh hell so far as I'm concerned."

Hutch lurched out of the door into the night. Somebody was helping the man Pete with his smashed wrist. The big outlaw who had called himself Towhead spoke to Dave in a low tone.

"Come mornin', Dave, we'll pull out."

"Yes, sir," replied Dave. "I'll be ready tuh go."

"Sleep mighty close to yore gun tonight, boy."

"I will. Hutch holds a grudge."

Dave slept fitfully. The card game lasted until past midnight. Hutch stumbled in at an hour or so past midnight and made a bed of saddle blankets on the floor. He had gotten more whisky and was bleary eyed.

Dave reckoned Hutch would make trouble, but he was wrong. Hutch slept like a log and was still asleep when Dave pulled on his overalls and boots and got into his chaps and overcoat at daylight. He and the big outlaw Towhead saddled up and rode swiftly out of the Hole in the Wall.

Hutch was left behind. Dave hated to think he was leaving Hutch in a tight and said so to his older companion.

"That young rascal will take care uh hisse'f, son. He'll find his own kind among them back there. Yore trail leads in another direction."

THEY rode all that day through the big drifts and pulled in at Jeff Hardin's line camp after dark, the second day.

Overhead the stars shone like spots of silver lights. A wolf howled his song. Jeff Hardin opened the cabin door in answer to their summons.

"Gosh, Towhead, yo're a stranger. Who is with yuh?"

"Dave Hearne, Friend uh mine, Jeff. You met him before."

Jeff got a good look at Dave. He grinned and held out his hand.

"I'll tell a man I met him. Come in. Got a posse behind yuh?"

Towhead chuckled softly and turned to Dave. "Jeff is all wool and a yard wide, ain't he?"

"Just cut out that wool stuff, Towhead. I'll help yuh put up your horses."

That night Towhead and Jeff Hardin talked until midnight. They wrote some letters and drew a map. Dave's stolen money was sealed in a big envelope. Dave dozed on Jeff's bunk, half awake, half asleep, his brain utterly tired, his body relaxed. Finally he slept.

When he woke up Jeff was cooking breakfast. Towhead was gone. Dave felt guilty for having gone to sleep on Jeff's bunk thataway, but when he mentioned it, Jeff threatened to throw him in a snow-drift.

"Where's Towhead?"

"He pulled out, Dave. Gone back to the Hole in the Wall country. He's safer there."

Dave asked no further questions. Who or what the big Towhead was he did not know. It was in accordance with his training under Bull Sandall that he did not question further. He helped Jeff with the breakfast and they talked about a lot of things that had nothing to do with the outlaw trail. Finally, when they were washing the dishes, Jeff voiced Towhead's plan.

"Here is a map, Dave. It tells you where to stop and who to talk to. They'll stake you to grub and a change of horses or whatever you need. Your destination is the K-Cross outfit in Arizona. That is where you'll start all over. I'm having dad squash that bank robbery charge. The sheriff and Doc and every man who followed you will back my play to have that whitewashed. Later on, when the

time comes right, we'll try and wipe out that Montana deal."

Dave bit his lips to fight back an aching sob in his throat. He had known mighty little about kindness in his short but full life.

"Gosh, Jeff, I . . ."

"Shut up, pardner, or out you go with your head in the biggest snowbank I can find."

"But how do yuh know I'll go straight, Jeff?"

"You are goin' to shake on it, Dave, and tell me that you'll play a straight game. That's all."

TEARS dimmed Dave's eyes. He held out his hand and Jeff gripped it hard. And so was made that pact that was to change the life of Dave Hearne.

Outside a low wind moaned. Both Dave and Jeff started for the door. There was no mistaking that welcome moaning of the warm Chinook wind that would cut away the drifts and lay bare the ridges. That meant easy travel for Dave.

"A good omen, Dave."

"A lucky sign, all right, Jeff."

They stood outside the cabin, their heads uncovered. The warm wind caressed their faces. Already a drop or two of melting snow came down from the sod roof of the cabin.

The drifts were softening when Dave shook hands with Jeff Hardin and stepped up on his horse.

"Yuh'll tell Towhead how I feel about it, Jeff?"

"You bet I will, Dave. Write when you get there. Ride your trail, Dave."

"You bet I will. So long."

And so Dave rode along his new trail and into a new life. Behind him lay the Hole in the Wall with its outlaws, its whisky, its cards, its stolen money.

Dave looked back. The snow was melting and he crossed a bare spot on a ridge where the tracks of his horse showed plain. Tracks that might be picked up and followed. Followed, perhaps, by Hutch, who wanted to kill him and who would always hunt him. Tracks in the snow and the mud under the slush of melting snow. Hutch would follow that trail. Because Hutch never forgot a grudge.

EIGHT years had passed since Dave left that line camp where Jeff Hardin had shaken hands with him. And now Dave Hearne was top hand of the K-Cross, which was one of old J. T.'s holdings.

Dave Hearne. . . . That old indictment against Dave Sandall, up there in Montana, had gathered the dust of eight long years in its pigeon hole. Dave now was ramrodding a pack layout that was gathering wild cattle. He had fallen into that Southwest way of handling cattle. He could ride the worst horse that ever was roped out of the remuda on a frosty morning. Dave Hearne was a cowboy and a good one. He had cattle savvy and he knew the knack of working a range clean in the rough country. And that is what puts the dollars in the bank for the owners.

Every man in the outfit knew that when the present foreman of the K-Cross left to go back to Texas and his own outfit which had begun to attract the notice of the oil folks, Dave Hearne was the cowboy who would step up into that job. And every cowboy on the K-Cross was waiting to see how Dave would come out. They liked him plenty. Dave Hearne, as wild a cowboy as ever pushed a pony down a slant, was due to ramrod the K-Cross.

He was rodding this pack layout now. Just a short round-up that old Tim Murphy called a "shindavvy." But he was making a clean work of the canyons and the ridges. The traps were filled with wild cattle. There were a hundred yearling and two-year-old mavericks now wearing a fresh K-Cross on their left ribs. And even old Tim Murphy, who rode the second best string of horses in the outfit, had to admit that Dave knew his job.

They were coming down off the Red Mountain with a small drive of wild stuff when one of the scary streers began to sniff the air. The others crowded up closer as the big spotted steer trotted on. Dave, riding on the point, sensed that something was wrong. He motioned to a cowboy to take his place and loped ahead down the wash. Two hundred yards from there he pulled up his horse. In the mid-

dle of the wash was a freshly killed steer. The throat was cut. No bullet mark. And pinned to the brand with a horseshoe nail was a piece of paper. It was about six inches square. On it a message was crudely printed.

"They still want you in Montana, kid," Dave read. "Hutch."

Dave shoved the note in his pocket. His hands shook a little as he crumpled that bit of paper. His face had gone a shade pale under its tan.

THE cattle were coming. Dave swung back in his saddle and rimmed the steers up the side of the wash and away from the freshly killed beef. But they had smelled the blood and acted crazy like cattle will when they smell fresh blood.

"What's wrong, Dave?" called a cowboy.

"Injuns bin whittlin' on our herd. Dead steer down yonder. We musta su-prised 'em and they drug it. Shove them dogies around pronto and keep 'em movin'."

Dave's brain whirled now. His eyes scanned the brushy covered slopes. His hand was near his gun. In his eyes there were tiny lights. Lights that were like sparks of fire about to kindle into a sudden flame. Dangerous sparks.

So Hutch had followed the sign that he left, that day, eight years ago, up in Wyoming. Hutch, who never forgot a grudge, had followed that sign from Wyoming to Arizona. Hutch had come to kill him. But before Hutch killed, he was warning like a rattlesnake. And that was not Hutch's way. Hutch, when he struck, struck without warning.

Dave reckoned now that he savvied something that had puzzled him a lot. Somebody had been stealing a lot of the K-Cross stuff. Mavericks, steers, even horses had been run into Mexico and sold there. And all they had ever been able to find was the tracks in the dirt. Dave grinned thinly.

"Hutch is the huckleberry. He's the rustler. He couldn't keep from tippin' his hand. He wants me tuh know he's stealin' this stuff and he figgers I'll have tuh let him." So mused Dave Hearne, as he let his cattle and cowboys ride on down the wash. He pulled up and lit a cigaret.

Then he rode slowly along the trail back to the dead beef.

"Long time no see yuh, kid." A lethal note in the sudden words.

Dave's hand was on his gun. That voice had come from a dense manzanita thicket to the left.

"Hold them hands high, kid, or I'll kill yuh."

"I'll lift 'em, Hutch," said Dave grimly, his arms going up. There was a thin smile on his face.

"Keep 'em high, kid."

"I will. Come on out of yore hole, yuh snake. Let's see how tough yuh look by now."

Dave knew that to shoot at that voice in the manzanita thicket would be folly. He wanted Hutch out in the open. Then he'd take a chance on getting to his gun.

HUTCH stepped slowly out of the thicket. He had a gun in his hand.

Eight years had made their mark on Hutch. His unshaven face was gaunt, deeply lined. A livid scar ran from one eye to the corner of his thin lipped mouth. He looked twice his age. His overalls and jumper were shabby. His boots looked rusty and old. There was already a sprinkling of gray hair around his temples. His yellow eyes alone were unchanged. Hutch had become a man. A hard bitten, dangerous man.

"What do yuh want, Hutch?" asked Dave, his hands still in the air.

"Money. I'm broke."

"You come to a bad spot tuh find money, Hutch. I got no money."

"You kin git money. Yo're sittin' on the world here. Got a job roddin' this K-Cross spread. You got friends. J. T. Hardin is worth millions. You kin git me money, kid."

"Supposin'," said Dave slowly, "that I tell yuh I can't git yuh money? What happens?"

That sneering smile that Dave remembered crept across Hutch's face. The yellow eyes were slitted, ugly, half insane. His thumb moved across the hammer of his .45.

"What happens? Kid, I kill yuh."

"There was a gent once, accordin' to the fairy tales, that killed a goose that laid golden aigs. Figger that out."

Hutch frowned, momentarily puzzled.

"Meanin' what, kid?"

"Meanin', Hutch, that if I stay alive, I might be worth money to yuh. Dead, I ain't worth a plugged Mexican dime and you know it. If you got brains, you'll look at it thataway."

"Yuh mean, Dave, that you'll come across with the money that I need?"

Dave grinned a little. He was thinking of that money he had saved here at the K-Cross. Money that he had put away for a nest egg. There was the girl Lois, who was running a little outfit for her crippled father, Lois Lane. Dave had never come right out and told Lois that he aimed to ask her to marry him, but he had hinted some. He had helped her brand her calves and gather her horses. He had rode out some broncs for her and made 'em into sure enough cow ponies.

Dave had dropped in at the Lane place whenever he could steal a few hours away from his work. Christmas time and Thanksgiving he always managed to stay there at the Lane ranch. Fourth of July he always took Lois to the rodeo in town and she would watch him rope and ride and bulldog steers. Dave had worked up into the first money at the rodeos and was rated as one of the best ropers and riders in the country. Lois seemed to be almighty proud of him when he tied a calf in close to record time. She would walk down the street with him, hanging onto his arm, just like she thought he was as good a cowboy as ever forked a pony.

Dave reckoned that he was in love with Lois. She was the first woman in his life and he worshipped her as only a stargazing cowboy can love a woman. He had saved his money. When the other boys blew in their wages for booze and poker and the dance hall girls, Dave had saved his and kept it in the bank in town.

He had thumbed catalogs that handled saddles and silver mounted spurs and bits. He knew exactly the saddle he wanted. It was worth a hundred dollars. There was a bit there that he had always wanted to buy. And a pair of spurs that he liked a lot. But he had salted away his money and done without. He had managed to get along with his old saddle. He told himself that he didn't need that fancy bit. And those shop made boots that he had

picked out of the catalog were still unpurchased. He ordered the cheapest boots that they sold.

So he had scraped and saved. He had gone without a lot of things that he wanted. When Jeff Hardin, who now was staying at the K-Cross ranch, joshed Dave and tried to bully him into accepting money, Dave had told him that if he had to take charity money, he'd go back to the outlaw game. And Jeff had the sense to know that Dave Hearne, above all things, was prideful and plumb independent and stood on his own feet.

DAVE looked into Hutch's yellow eyes. Hutch was as dangerous a man as you would want to meet.

"Yuh think I owe yuh somethin', Hutch?"

"Tuh hell with that. I want money. You kin git it. I want to pull out for South America and yo're grub stakin' me. Charge the bill to the alkali dust and let the rain settle it. I want money and I'll git it or kill you, one or the other."

"Hutch, I ain't afraid uh you. I never was afraid uh you. I never expect tuh be afraid uh you. If yuh need help, I'll help yuh. But I ain't standin' for any man tuh throw down on me with a gun and make me come across with money. If you think that I'm puttin' out any of the Hardin money, yo're loco."

"You handle the check book for the K-Cross."

"Yeh. I have tuh pay off the boys and buy grub. But I ain't usin' a dollar of J. T.'s money tuh pay you."

"How about that golden egg proposition?"

Dave's grin thinned a little. His hazel eyes had that same light in them that had been there that hour when he had killed Bull Sandall. He was ready to kill or be killed now.

"Hutch, if yo're up against it and need money, I'll help yuh out. It'll be my own money, though."

"Yo're a damn' fool, kid. You always was."

"If yuh git money outa me, Hutch," Dave went on, "it will be money that I earned here workin' with this spread. It will be honest money. It will be wages that I made honest and square. You got

no right to call on me for money. That night at the Hole in the Wall we split the blankets. We're square. But if yuh need money, and yuh look like yuh do, I'll help yuh outa my own pocket."

"Yuh talk like a damned preacher, kid. J. T. Hardin will never miss a few thousand. Come on, Dave, I don't want yore lousy chicken feed. What I want is big cash. If yuh don't pay off, then there will be plenty more steers like that 'un there. It'll cost yuh some real money.

"You don't git a dollar uh J. T.'s money, Hutch. And if yuh think yuh kin bluff me into any game like that, just start and try 'er on."

"Yuh ain't payin', kid?"

Dave looked into Hutch's yellow eyes. "Not one damned penny of J. T.'s money, Hutch."

"Then ride along. I'll take this K-Cross layout to as purty a trimmin' as ever a layout got. Ride along. *Andale*: Vamoose! You'll have tuh hire a new crew tuh peel the hides off these dead K-Cross steers."

Dave rolled up and lit a cigaret. He grinned down from his saddle at the gun in Hutch's hand.

"Done any killin' lately, Hutch?"

"That line rider at the Circle was the last 'un."

"How many notches by now?"

"Twelve, kid. You'll make thirteen."

"Thirteen's an unlucky number, Hutch. It'll never be notched on that smoke pole."

"Think not?"

"I know it won't. Not unless yuh murder me here."

"I'd ruther see yuh live and suffer, kid. I'm dealin' yuh misery from now on. I'll whittle on this K-Cross herd till yuh won't have enough cattle left tuh bother an acre field. Then, when I git ready, I'll gut-shoot yuh."

XII

THERE was a movement in the brush. For a moment Dave looked toward the sound. Hutch's mouth twisted a little.

"Come on out, Pete," he said.

From the brush came the man who had stepped into the bunkhouse at the Hole in the Wall that night eight years ago. He

leered at Dave. There was a look on his face that chilled Dave's blood. This man Pete was holding his gun in his left hand. His right hand had been amputated at the wrist. Dave's bullet had done that. To save Hutch's life he had crippled this man. The man who had ridden into the Hole in the Wall to kill Hutch. Now Pete and Hutch were working together. And they aimed to kill Dave when they got around to it.

"Well?" said Dave. "Just where do you fit into this picture, anyhow?"

"That, button, is just my own affair." Pete's voice was hard.

"I'll be makin' it a part uh mine," said Dave. "You and Hutch think you kin come down here and steal cattle from J. T. Well, make another guess. I'm roddin' this layout for a spell. The only way yuh'll win now is to kill me. I kept you from killin' Hutch eight years ago. I saved Hutch's life. You lost a hand. I'm still alive and all in one piece. And I tell yuh here and now that it will take the two of yuh and a lot more such skunks tuh smash me and the K-Cross. That goes as she lays. If she don't lay right, commence."

Pete crouched like some animal about to spring. His gun was ready in his hand. Dave watched the man with slitted eyes. He was outmatched two to one. It was them or him. Yet he felt no fear of these two outlaws. For all the fact that Hutch was a killer, Dave held him in contempt. He had seen the light of fear in Hutch's yellow eyes. He knew that, at heart, Hutch was a coward.

Of the man Pete, he knew this. That Pete had been afraid to call Hutch that night at the Hole in the Wall until he had every advantage. His was a craven sort of courage given to trapped coyotes and hydrophobia skunks.

"If she don't lay right, commence," he had called.

PETE would have opened up on Dave. It was in his eyes, in the way he handled himself.

"Cut it, Pete," gritted Hutch suddenly.

"I'm killin' 'im," snarled Pete. "It was him that gimme this stump of an arm instead of a hand. I'm killin' him right now. He's my meat."

"Before yuh go any further," rasped Hutch, "listen tuh this. We ain't here tuh kill this gent. What we want is money. He's the goose that lays the golden eggs. Put up that cannon, Pete. I'm roddin' this. Dave is goin' tuh be a nice boy and put green money in our Levis. Eh, Dave?"

"I got some money in the bank," said Dave. "Honest money. So far as the Pete gent is concerned, I could see him go hungry and git so ga'nt that his backbone meets his ribs. But there was a time when you was my friend. If you need money, Hutch, I'll stake yuh. But if yuh steal cattle from J. T. it means war between me and you."

Not far off came the sound of riders. Some of the K-Cross cowboys were coming.

Hutch and Pete heard the sound of horses kicking gravel and busting brush. A cunning glint came into the yellow eyes of Hutch. His mouth grinned sideways.

"Be at that cabin on Manzanita Crick tomorrow night with all the money yuh got, kid. I need it. There's a bullet hole in my lung that needs a doctor's care. I'm hungry and half naked. They bin on my trail plumb down from Idaho. I helped yuh once, Dave. We started out like pardners. Will yuh help a man?"

"Tomorrow night at midnight at that cabin on Manzanita Crick," nodded Dave. "Yuh said 'er, Hutch."

THERE was no moon. Just a cluster of stars up overhead. . . . The smell of the pines. . . . Death waiting. Death waited for Dave, who was fighting for the honesty that he had found, fighting against Hutch, whose yellow eyes could see at night.

Dave had left a letter for the girl Lois. It told her that he was going away on a long trip and that she could somewhere find a better man.

There was another letter to J. T. Hardin, and a note for Jeff. There was a hundred dollar bill to pay for some flowers now and then to place on the grave of the big outlaw Towhead who had died last winter of pneumonia. Towhead, who had made possible Dave's chance for happiness, buried up yonder in Wyoming.

So Dave had balanced his books that

evening. He had shaved and the cook had cut his hair. He had put on clean underwear and new overalls and jumper and a freshly washed flannel shirt. In his pocket was some money. His gun was tied to his thigh.

He reckoned that tonight was the time for him to settle once and for all with Hutch. He would give Hutch a few hundred dollars to git rid of him. If Hutch got ugly, then they would scrap it out. And Pete would be somewhere near to take chips in the game. It was throwing the odds against Dave. But Dave didn't count the odds. He was thinking only of what he had to do and what he was leaving behind if he died.

He wondered how it felt to die. To lie there on the ground, a bullet in your belly, fighting for breath, fighting against that black inevitable. He wondered what death had to offer beyond this life here on earth. He wondered how he would stand the pain of those last moments of agony. To die game was part of a man's code. To give up head when a man was fighting against death, that was being a quitter.

Hutch would be waiting—Hutch, with the eyes that could see in the dark. Hutch would have the advantage.

Funny, how a man remembered little things when he was riding to meet death. Dave was remembering Bull and how Bull used to take off his boots and shake out the snakes that weren't there. He remembered Big Red and the water cure at the reform school. How he had met Hutch and how Hutch had ripped open Big Red's belly with that knife. Dave wondered if he'd be meeting Big Red when he got killed.

"Dave!"

Dave pulled up. There was a man standing in the middle of the trail. The man was Jeff Hardin.

"GOSH, Jeff," said Dave, "yuh gave me a start."

"Did I, Dave?"

"Yuh like tuh scared me outa my boots."

There was a long moment of silence. Dave was wondering why Jeff Hardin was there.

"Travelin', Dave, or just goin' somewhere?"

"Travelin', Jeff."

"Yonderly?" Jeff eyed Dave closely.

"Most yonderly, Jeff."

"Figgerin' on just what?"

There was another silence. Dave reckoned that this was a one-man job. No use gittin' Jeff Hardin mixed up in it.

"Figgerin' on nothin', Jeff."

"That," said Jeff Hardin, "is the first lie I ever heard you tell, Dave."

"Meanin' how, Jeff?"

"Meanin', you boneheaded kid, that whenever a man does me the kind of a favor you did, he don't go out alone to fight. I'm with yuh, Dave, win, lose, or draw."

"You got money behind yuh, Jeff. Yore daddy is J. T. Hardin. Yuh got too much to lose."

"Where's Hutch and this Pete gent waitin', Dave?"

"What do you know about them?"

"More than you'd expect. They've been in here for quite a while. I wasn't raised on a chicken farm, Dave. Let's go."

Dave hesitated. Through his mind ran the threads of incidents. He and Jeff had worked together. They had slept under the same rain-drenched tarp. They had pushed their ponies down the same slope after the same steer. They had watched the stars together and swapped the sort of talk that men swap when there is a moon and that feeling of lonesomeness creeps into a cowboy's heart.

"Better turn back, Jeff."

"Go to hell, bonehead."

"It'll be a tough place, Jeff."

"Listen, do I look or act like a yellow bellied quitter? Come on, Dave."

They rode on together. Now and then their stirrups touched.

"Jeff?"

"Spit 'er out, cowboy."

"J. T. is goin' tuh take it hard if anything happens to yuh. Better turn back."

"J. T." said Jeff, "told me that it was kind of all right, Dave. Fact is, when I told him where and why I was going, he said that if I didn't go, he'd think that he had a son that was as yellow as a coyote. Lead the way, bonehead."

BYOND was the cabin on Manzanita Creek. Dave and Jeff pulled up. The cabin was a hundred yards beyond. As

3—Action Stories—October

Dave and Jeff stepped down from their horses, Jeff spoke.

"I saw Lois yesterday. I'm going to be the best man at your wedding if we come out of this, Dave."

They gripped hands there in the darkness. Then, their guns ready, they moved cautiously toward the cabin that was hidden in the night. It was still half an hour until midnight.

Dave and Jeff crouched there in the darkness. Minutes seemed hours. That half hour seemed eternity.

Then a man coughed in the darkness. Jeff Hardin's gun was spitting fire. Dave shot at the spewing flame out yonder. Now the bullets were snarling through the black night.

But only one gun out yonder was barking.

Dave, breathing hard, was jerking the lever of a carbine. Jeff was lying prone, shooting, rolling to a fresh position, shooting again. Dave, bewildered by the blackness, was shooting blindly.

The crack of guns. A man groaning as he died. The crimson and orange colored flame of guns that spurted fire. Jeff Hardin's voice, over near Dave.

Now a sudden burst of flame as something caught fire. Jeff Hardin laughed harshly.

"Can of kerosene, Dave, old trooper. A dead center. Look at that blaze."

"How . . . How in hell did you hit it, Jeff?"

"Your old friend Hutch," came the reply, "is not the only man who can see in the dark."

"Yuh mean that . . ."

"Just as well as I see in daylight, bonehead. Yonder is your man. Git 'im."

IN the light of the burning kerosene and the wood it had ignited, stood Hutch. He stood there alone, his six-shooter in his hand.

Dave walked toward him slowly. The fire showed them both in its reflection.

"We finish her here, Hutch?"

"Just as well here as anywhere. Come and git it, kid."

Dave crouched, half doubled up. He wanted Hutch to shoot first.

Hutch had his gun cocked. His hat was off and in the firelight his yellow eyes

showed like the eyes of a cougar.

"Come and git it, kid."

"I'm a-comin', Hutch."

Odd how Dave thought of Bull now. It was just like he had felt when Bull had tried to kill him. It was kill or be killed now. It was him or Hutch. But he wanted Hutch to shoot first.

Now Hutch's gun ripped fire. Dave was thrown off balance by the heavy slug that tore through his thigh. It made him stagger. He was jerking the trigger of his gun, thumbing back the hammer of his .45.

It all seemed like a red haze. He saw Hutch fall. He heard the deafening echo of his own gun—Jeff's voice.

Now he weaved a crooked way toward Hutch, who lay there in a queer position, sort of doubled up.

Dave's thigh hurt like hell now. He fell, then got onto his legs, only to fall again. He could hear Hutch's voice calling through the smoky echoes of the guns that had belched out their message of death.

Dimly, Dave heard Jeff's voice. Jeff was saying something. He got part of it.

"You . . . you got him, Dave. Nice . . . work. . . . I got the other coyote. . . . Hardly worth burying, Dave . . ."

Now Dave was there beside Hutch. He was smeared with blood. There was the light of the fire. Hutch's yellow eyes glazing. Hutch's voice speaking in a rattling, husky whisper.

"Yuh win, kid. . . . Pick up the marbles. . . . No hard feelin's, kid, savvy? I shot for yore belly . . . missed. . . . Too much booze. . . . Kid, you win, but listen . . . listen, kid. You might think you was a

killer but you . . . you didn't have the stuff. . . . So-long, Dave. So-long, kid. No . . . hard . . . feelin's."

Dave felt Hutch die in his arms. Somehow, he had never been able to hate Hutch. Tears smarted Dave's eyes. He almost forgot the pain in his thigh. Then he felt sort of dizzy. He thought he could hear Jeff saying something. Then everything went black.

"Great old kid," murmured Jeff Hardin, when he dressed the bullet hole in Dave's leg, while Dave tossed and muttered in that half-death we call delirium.

"Great old kid, Dave. We'll have you fixed up in no time. What the hell's a bullet hole, anyhow? Then you'll get married, old man. I'll give you away to the blushin' bride. There'll be that notice from Texas we've held out on you, that makes you worth plenty money. And Dave, old boy, there will be that pardon signed by the governor of Montana. You'll be free, old man. Free. . . ."

Tears choked the voice of Jeff Hardin, who owed his life to this boy who lay there on the ground, moaning a little. Jeff and his year old bride always looked upon Dave Hearne as a man who had given them, by the grace of God, their happiness.

"Hell, Dave," Jeff Hardin finished, and Dave's eyes opened now and his game grin answered. "Hell, you never was a killer."

"I . . . reckon yo're about right, Jeff. . . ."

Jeff sat back on the ground. In a little while a wagon would come from the ranch. It would take Dave back there where he would be nursed to health.

No, Dave Hearne never was a killer.

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RIDERS OF THE BOSQUE

By JED AGEE

Hunt your lairs, bandito wolves! For hell is roaring down from Texas. . . . El Tejanito is riding your crimson back-trail—and his guns are primed for quick-trigger reckoning!

THE cell-door creaked open. Mike Stanley turned his grim head to see the Mex turnkey silhouetted against the patch of light from the corridor.

"Come out, gringo! Our *jefe politico* softens; lets you go. If I had my way—"

Hand drawn swiftly edgeway across his throat made perfect end to the sentence.

"If I were tied!" Mike said contemptuously. "Else not your hands, but your feet, would move with swiftness."

Painfully, clumsily, he shuffled toward the door in the cowhide sandals which Flores' light-fingered police had given him a week before, upon his arrest and stripping. He was suspicious of a trick. Anything could happen in these jails south of the Rio Grande. It would not have amazed him, had the gloomy corridor suddenly flamed with shots.

But he passed nobody, saw nobody, until

they came out to the half-patio which was the front entry of the jail. The turnkey slouched across it, swinging his ring of great iron keys. Outside, on a bench built along the street wall, sat three dapper men. Back of them in a sort of semi-circle were most of Flores' inhabitants.

"Here is the American, Excellency," the turnkey muttered, bobbing shaggy head before the central figure of the three.

"Ah!" the squat man cried, and smiled. He was of much the same size as Mike Stanley—of middle height, wide-shouldered. He had a handsome, regular-featured face, the skin old ivory, the mouth red and full-lipped as a woman's. "Well, gringo, I have told my brother, the *jefe politico*, that we may well be merciful. So, today, you will be escorted to the north side of Flores and sent on. But if ever you come again to Flores—"

"And my property?" Mike demanded, green eyes very bright and very hard. He used Spanish as if it were his mother tongue. "My clothing, for one thing. My saddle and bridle, my sorrel gelding, my two Colts which you now wear belted on you, and my two thousand *pesos* of American gold."

"It must be some sort of fever, brought on by the darkness of the cell," Hugo Casillas said. "But, never can it be said that Hugo Casillas was anything but fair. My brother! Is this true? Did this gringo, then, have property?"

"Those rags in which he stands. Not so much as a hat," the *jefe político* shrugged. He was a younger duplicate of Hugo. "I saw him when he was brought before me for thievery."

"I understand," Mike nodded. "Now, all of you remember this: You have grown puffed up because your dealing is with the *gente* like these—" he jerked shaggy head toward the watchful, grinning people. "People of your own race, who fear you. You will learn of your great mistake. You will come to be very sorry that you came sneaking up behind me in the cantina and made arrest the pretense for robbing me. Very sorry!"

"*Sarjento!*" Hugo Casillas said to the police non-com' at his elbow. "Put your hand across his insolent mouth!"

THE sergeant grinned and stepped briskly forward. He had nothing to fear from this haggard, beard-stubbed, half-starved scarecrow. He came within a yard of Mike Stanley, then Mike shifted his feet and stepped forward to meet him. A big fist came looping up, to crash against the sergeant's jaw; a blow that began at the right ankle. The sergeant seemed to rise bodily, then he dropped upon his face in the dust of the street.

"Kill him!" someone yelled from the crowd. "Stamp him to death!"

A stone came hurtling at Mike. He saw it, and ducked, but not quickly enough to make it miss completely. It struck glancingly, cutting a jagged gash in his scalp. He went down to his face, almost across the unconscious policeman.

As he propped himself up with his hands, dizzy and sick, he was conscious

of the surge forward of the crowd. Then a shrill yell and the dull beat of galloping hoofs. Dust flew up in his face. He shook his head and saw the legs of a horse almost over him. Dimly he heard a high, clear voice.

"Hugo Casillas! What sort of murder is this! I saw your policeman come forward! And I saw this man strike to protect himself! And so, brave cowards that you are, you all come to do what no one of you dare do! This man is no Mexican and before your mob touches him, my pistol will be empty!"

"You do not understand, *señorita*," Casillas told the girl, as Mike scrambled weakly to his feet. "He is a dog of a *ladron*, a thief. Last week, he was found trying to rob the cash-drawer of Gonzales' cantina. He was arrested and today, as we released him, he insulted the noble Mexican people. Naturally, they resented it."

"And that is a lie!" Mike said thickly, but calmly.

"Gringo!" Hugo Casillas answered softly. "None gives the lie to a Casillas—and lives! So—"

"Regardless of all that," the girl said quickly, looking down at Mike and looking away again with something like distaste showing on clear, tanned face, "I will take him with me."

She looked at him again and Mike's green eyes twinkled a little. He was not a soul easily cast down. He would laugh—he had laughed—in the very shadow of all fashions of death. Now, it amused him to see how this golden-haired, blue-eyed youngster—she was no more than eighteen or nineteen—shrank from him, but intended to save him from the mob, anyway.

"Catch hold of my stirrup-leather," she told him shortly.

As the pinto moved down the street, Casillas called after Mike:

"Remember what I said: None gives the lie to a Casillas—and lives! Remember that, gringo!"

"And you remember what I told you: You will be very sorry!" Mike answered him evenly.

"BE still!" the girl rapped at him. "I should think you'd be satisfied to escape that mob with a whole skin! I'll take you to the hotel and fix you up with

decent clothes. Tomorrow I'll borrow a horse for you and you can ride out of town with my mozo and me."

"You're from the Hacienda Tenedor?" Mike inquired. "You're Majors' girl? I thought so! I'll go a li'l bit farther with you. But not to the inn. An' the clothes an' all can wait a while. . . . I'll likely be seein' you again. An'—thanks for chargin' the Mex', back there!"

He let go of the stirrup-leather. They were nearing the edge of Flores. Mike turned down the last side-street, and moved past the curious people in the 'dobe houses without a look behind him. He passed out of sight, near the river, and walked down to the bank. There was nobody in sight. He stepped down into the edge of the shallow stream, stripped and bathed, then put on the ragged shirt and pants again.

In a thick clump of bushes, from which he could see the dull-red tiles of the town's roofs, he lay upon his stomach to wait broodingly for dark. He had the patience of the Indian—as he had the Apache's wolf-keen hearing and sight.

"Yes, sir! You'll be plenty grievin'," he muttered. Presently, he fell asleep. When he waked, it was inky dark.

He went back toward town. He dodged lighted doorways and came like a shadow to the long, white-plastered house of the Casillas. The days before his arrest had given him accurate knowledge of Flores and its greats and near-greats. He stopped at the entry of the patio and listened. Then he slid inside.

The evening meal was over. He found Hugo Casillas with his brother and puffy-faced young Mexican they called Julio Bustos, sitting in a room off the big patio, drinking and smoking. Flat against the wall, Mike listened to their talk. Casillas the *jefe político* got up and said he was going to see his girl.

Mike shrank back from the door and let him go, then went back. Hugo Casillas and Bustos had their heads close together. He could hear only fragments of their talk.

"—And then?" Bustos said, grinning. "And then the girl? She is a little tiger cat, Hugo, my old!"

Hugo grinned.

"Yes . . . but it will be pleasant to tame

that tiger kitten. Can you think of any girl for five hundred miles in any direction, to compare with her? And she—she has not been wise. . . . She rides roughshod over us, if we do not jump from the path. She has treated me—me!—as if I were but a grade above a *peon*! It will be pleasant, Julio. . . ."

Mike nodded shadowly and the corners of his thin mouth lifted. They had some sort of deal on, these two. For Julio got up and remarked that everything was ready. He would ride south with dawn. Hugo Casillas only nodded and continued to stare smilingly at the ceiling. But after Julio had gone Hugo stood up and yawned. Mike followed him noiselessly to the door of a bedroom.

He waited until he heard snores, inside. Then he tried the latch. The door swung open and still Hugo snored. Mike slid inside, closing the door gently. He crossed to the bed and his groping hand found Hugo's clothing across a bench. Found also his own crossed shell-belts and the white-handled, silver-plated .44s in his carved scabbards. There was a candlestick on the bench, with matches beside it.

Mike grinned as he drew a pistol out. Swiftly he scratched a match, turning his head away from the flare as he put it to the candle-wick. There was a quick creaking of the rawhide-laced cot. Hugo Casillas sat up, glaring at the light.

"**B**E still!" Mike said grimly. "I *might* miss, but I never have. . . . Did I not tell you that you would be sorry you robbed me? And is not the word of a *buscadero* usually kept? Did you—and that dog-brother of yours—think that I was but a *tourista*, an innocent, to be robbed?"

"What do you want?" Hugo demanded shakily.

"Put out your hands."

He got the rawhide rope from the wall-peg, and tied Hugo quickly and skilfully, gagging him with the corner of a sheet. Then he set the gun down and looked around. There were his clothes, on pegs in a corner. There was water in an olla; and an earthen basin, and Hugo's razor. He stripped and dressed and shaved. Belted on his pistols. Took his Winchester carbine, still in the saddle-scabbard.

But his saddle, he thought, must be in the stable. As for his money—he had searched the place thoroughly as he moved about. It was not there.

He put down the carbine and went over to take the gag out of Hugo's mouth. He asked for his money.

"We divided it," Hugo shrugged sullenly. "I lost my share within the hour, at cards. Your saddle is in the room of my stable-mozo. I—we did not know who you were. We had no thought that you were one of the *buscaderos*—"

Mike nodded grimly, with lift of one hard mouth-corner. He took the sheet and gagged Hugo more thoroughly. Then, in the lariat, he made a hangman's knot. Hugo's eyes bulged over the sheet. Mike stood on the bench, to pass the riata over a ceiling beam. Then he dropped lightly down and picked up Hugo as if he were a child. Hugo stiffened and moved his head from side to side desperately, his eyes gleaming in the candle-light. But presently he stood rigid with the noose about his neck, and Mike grinned.

"You'll be all right if you don't happen to slip."

He blew out the candle and went out, closing the door. He found his big golden sorrel in a stall, but needed five minutes to locate the stable-mozo's room. And the man rose up with an oath, off his pallet.

Mike cracked him over the head with pistol barrel. His saddle was hanging there, with others, some cow saddles, some of the big-borned Mexican hulls, elaborately decorated with gold and silver. All but his own he slashed with the mozo's dagger, reducing them to ruin. Then he went out to saddle King. He was just swinging up when a man ran at him out of the darkness and fired a pistol almost in his face.

Mike moved with the suddenness of an explosion. His hand swept down to his left-hand gun, flicked it out and let the hammer drop almost before the Mexican's shot had stopped¹ roaring. The man dropped with a grunt like a pole-axed bull's. Mike tickled the big sorrel and shot away across the fenceless open. He rode out of town with a thunder of hoofs that brought people running to their doors.

ONCE out of town, heading south, Mike veered around to the north.

He knew the country well. If it were his first visit to Flores, it was not his first, or his tenth, to the region. With Big Ben Cary's gang, he had run three herds of "wet" cattle out of the Flores River country.

So he headed for rocky slopes and upon them turned due north. He lay down upon the bare ground, in an arroyo, near midnight. He fell asleep with King's reins in his hand.

There was no sign of pursuit when he came out of the arroyo the next morning. Dawn found him on the road to the Border—and to the big Hacienda Tenedor of Andrew Majors. He stopped at a 'dobe house and the woman of the place brought him fat, brown beans and leathery *tortillas* and fresh beef cooked over an open fire. He ate and drank black coffee and gossiped with her over cigarets.

Bandits, she said, were bad—and getting worse. Nobody was safe from pillaging; from murder, if they objected.

"*Buscaderos americanos?*" Mike asked her.

"No, I think that these are not gringos. We have had them, too, but not for long. I can remember them, señor. Big men, smiling even when they killed; open-handed men, throwing gold to poor women like me. Or, perhaps, kissing me. . . . *Ay de mí!* I remember one day ten years ago. I lived with my man twenty miles north and east of this place. And upon us, out of a dust cloud, came cattle. Many cattle! Perhaps a thousand. And from the dust came singing of a sort to make one's spine tingle. . . ."

She shook her sleek head with its threads of gray against crow black. Her face was suddenly young again.

"*Ay de mí!* My man spoke English. He told me the song:

"*Long riding it's an easy life,
A life that's full of fun.
The prairie is our tavern;
The moon, it is our sun!*"

"And a boy rode out of the haze. . . . Hair like yours, but lighter, had he, señor. And—yes! Eyes of green had he, also like yours. But his nose was straight. A beautiful boy! And suddenly, out of the tornillo scrub, came *vaqueros* of the

rancher whom these buscaderos had stripped. They were very close. Five of them in this party. They charged down upon this boy of mine.

"And he . . . *Ay de mi!* The two white-handled pistols came like snakes from their sheaths at his sides. And like snakes they struck. Death to two of those *vaqueros*. The others fled. And he, this boy, still smiling, he came over to me.

"A gold piece for a kiss!" he said to me. I—well, I knew that he would give the gold piece, anyway, so I laughed and told him to take it and forget the gold. He bent down and kissed me, half-lifting me from the ground. And then—

"More *vaqueros* came. From the rear of the herd the firing was like thunder in the mountains. My boy flung me the gold piece and rode with a yell, but still laughing, back to the fight. And I never saw him again. But I heard of him. Heard of how *banditos* from this side had stripped his father's ranch and murdered his father and his brother. So he, having but horse and pistols, began raiding upon this side. *El Tejanito*—the Little Texan—our *vaqueros* named him. I wonder where he is. . . ."

"*Quien sabe?*" Mike grinned. He had almost forgotten that fight. There had been so many since!

MIKE stood up. For toward the cabin came Sue Majors with a Mexican riding behind her. She reined in and stared down at him.

"You—you—Hugo Casillas was telling truth, then, when he called you a thief!" she said angrily, and Mike only grinned. "They roused me last night, after you had slipped into Hugo's room and stolen his clothing, his pistols and his horse and saddle. I suppose Hugo was completely drunk, or he wouldn't have slept through it all."

"Likely not," said Mike gravely. "Now that you mention it, I can see that, too. Liquor's an awful thing. Man oughtn't to drink it, I reckon. You ridin' my way? Fine! I hate ridin' alone."

"I'm going home. And my father wouldn't have a thief on the Tenedor! If you know what's best for you, you'll start riding as fast as Casillas' horse can travel—back into Texas! My father would

have you thrown right off the ranch."

"Then we won't tell him," Mike decided, nodding. "You see, I have got to hit the Tenedor. It's right across the directest line to the Bawdeh. An' Casillas'll maybe chase me. Awful, if he caught me."

"Why did you take the pistols?" she asked contemptuously.

"Oh, them? Why, they're worth twenty-five apiece, anyhow. I can always cash 'em in. Ready?"

He swung up on King. She looked furiously at him, then spurred on ahead, chin up. The *vaquero* glared at Mike, then followed Sue Majors. Mike watched, then lifted hand to hatbrim in salute to the woman of the cabin:

"*Adios!* I am sorry that I have not so much as *un centavo*. But there is a man of your race who owes me four thousand, six hundred pesos. That I will collect. And I will bring or send you a gold piece, as on that day ten years ago I gave you one, for a kiss!"

He spurred after Sue and the *vaquero*. She looked straight front, when he caught up with her and leaned a little from the saddle toward her, to remark upon the beauty of the morning. He continued to talk, over the miles to Tenedor's line. He answered, questions which he pretended she asked him; he asked her questions and answered them himself.

But, for all this foolery, Mike was very much on guard. He watched the back trail and he watched the front. His green eyes roved from right to left. Hugo Casillas was not apt to forget the man who had stood him with rope about his neck, in his own house, for servants to see!

THEY crossed the Tenedor boundary. And within a mile, Mike leaned forward. She saw the huddled body of the *vaquero* as soon as he. Together they raced across to where the dead man lay. They stared down at him. Then, instinctively, they looked one at the other. The girl made a strangling sound. Her tanned face had gone white; her blue eyes were very wide and the dilated pupils made them seem almost black.

"I—he was a good man, this Roman. . . . One of my father's best. . . . I—I cannot think who killed him. . . ."

"That another o' yo's?" Mike asked

quietly, nodding jerkily toward the second body, which lay behind a clump of greasewood, with only cotton-jumpered arm showing.

"Escopa!" she said, when a jump of her horse let her see. "Yes! He was foreman. I—oh, let's go to the house!"

But Mike swung down, first. He touched the body of Escopa. It was still warm. He looked at the blood in the ground. Fresh. . . . Four or five hours at the very outside, since this man had been riddled with bullets.

"I have got an idee what's at the house—what she'll find," he muttered as the girl galloped off toward the ranch-house.

He made the saddle without touching stirrups. He rammed the steel to King and the sorrel jumped into a gallop that overhauled the others ahead as if they were carthorses.

They came up to the *hacienda* house. A squat, sulky-faced and swaggering Mexican, grizzled, scarred, was squatting at a corner of the long house, beyond the entry. He got up and came to take Sue's reins.

"My father!" she gasped. "He is here?"

"No, señorita." The man frowned. "Did you not meet him? He rode out early this morning, with Roman and Escopa. I thought that he must have gone on toward Flores, to meet you, when they did not come back. I—"

"Roman and Escopa! They are dead—murdered!" she whispered. "And my father . . ."

MIKE spurred King forward, to put up his hand and steady her. The Mexican gaped at her, heavy mouth sagging. Slowly, very slowly, he shook his head.

"And Escopa owed me ten pesos! Well, no need to think of that now! But the *patron*! *Cuerpo de dios*! The letter—"

He fished frantically under his green jacket and brought out a soiled envelope. He handed it up to Sue, who was straightening in the saddle again, with underlip caught between her teeth. Mike leaned to read over her shoulder:

"We hold your father for five thousand dollars. Get it from his bank in Flores. Bring it, in American bills, before noon

tomorrow, to La Piedra Cabeza, on Arroyo Bonito. You must come alone. Our men will be hidden in the brush, their rifles commanding all sides of the Rock. If you do not bring the five thousand dollars, or if you tell anyone—never will you see more of your father than his finger."

SUE crumpled the paper and thrust it swiftly into a pocket of her shirt. As if concealing it from Mike.

"A man I did not know brought it, but an hour or so ago," the squat Mexican told her. "He said that it was for you."

"I must go to Flores quickly! Saddle a fresh horse—the fastest in the corrals, Cesar!"

"Don't get excited about this," Mike counseled her. "If you take that money to La Piedra Cabeza, you'll be no closer gettin' yo' father loose. There's a lot in this business that you don't know anything about."

"I'll do this my own way," she flared at him. "Keep out of Tenedor affairs."

"You'll be heaps better off doin' it my way. This is the kind o' thing I do best."

"I thought that *your* specialty was robbing tills—and stealing clothes. You keep out of this or I'll have my men tie you up. I know what I'm to do."

He lifted heavy shoulders resignedly and looked out across the Tenedor range to where the Sierra Jerónimo lifted jagged, blue-hazed peaks that walled in the western horizon. He rode around the house, following Sue and the swaggering Cesar.

There were two *vaqueros* beyond a 'dobe-walled corral. He went across to them and asked the road to the Hacienda Jerónimo of Hugo Casillas. They pointed toward the mountains and explained the trail. He nodded and without speaking again to the girl, rode on into the west.

"So the *banditos* hole up in the mountains somewhere." He grinned sardonically. "I bet you! If I remember—an' I reckon I do!—Piedra Cabeza on Arroyo Bonito'd be just about midway between Jerónimo an' Flores."

He rode all afternoon across range that he knew must belong to Hugo Casillas. The arroyo-gashed foothills of the Jerónimos were no strange country to him. He knew a peak and a trail up that peak. From that height, a fire would show.

MIKE went on up the steep trail in the darkness. It was a windless night, when sounds carried. He was careful to keep against the shoulder, the inside, of the trail. When he came out upon the peak he looked out over the welter of canyons and "releases" below. It was still dark, for the moon had not pushed up over the lowest ridge.

"Thought so!" he grunted, catching a pin-point of ruddy light, below and to his left.

It was painfully slow travel, getting across the arroyos of the lower heights. The moon came up, to help. He found the first at last, near the end of a narrow arroyo. He left King with reins trailing and moved as soundlessly as an Apache over the ridge to look down upon the men at the fire. There was no sign of Majors. Only four *vaqueros* with rifles close at hand. In the end of the arroyo was a dark blotch—a cave-mouth, he thought.

"Killing those two Tenedor men was not exciting," one of the lounging men drawled. "I wish I had gone with Bustos to capture the Governor's bullion train."

"With word going to the Governor of the wicked *banditos* around Flores," a man grunted from across the fire, "those who rode with Bustos may get a bellyful of excitement. All the troops in the State may be with that gold. I like it here."

Mike worked along the ridge toward the arroyo end, toward that seeming cave-mouth. Still the men loafed at the fire. He began to crawl down the slanting wall. Nobody at the fire turned a head when he wriggled across the arroyo bottom. At the cave-mouth he seemed to hear breathing.

Mike slid inside and whispered Majors' name. A grunt sounded. He worked that way, found the rancher bound and gagged. He cut him loose and took the gag from his mouth.

"Let's go! Where are their hawsees?" he grunted.

"Next draw. Where's yo's? My ankle's sprained. I can crawl."

At the entrance, Mike scowled. How two of them could crawl from that box without being heard, then seen. . . .

"Stay here," he grunted to the old man.

Mike went out. Never in his life had he moved so silently. Inch by inch, mo-

mentarily expecting someone to jump up from the fire with a yell—and a shot, he crawled toward the fire. The thirty yards seemed like miles. Still the men sprawled upon their blankets, smoking, muttering, laughing occasionally.

He came within a yard of them. One was telling some tale of a *buscadero* raid upon a ranch where he had worked:

"And so, we took up the trail. *Por dios!* That was a business! We would run in at them, trying to kill one or two and stampede the herd. They would fight back. There was one there who was younger than all the other gringos, but always first to rush at us. *El Tejanito!* My *patron* called us off, before I had opportunity to meet him.

"I heard that he is dead. Well! It is my thought that, had I fired on him that day, he would have died the sooner. I would have liked to kill him."

"**T**TEJANITO! *Tejanito!*" Mike yelled in his very ear. "That is why I come back tonight."

The man screamed and scrambled across another's body to get up and away. He left his rifle where it laid. The others jumped, grunting, swearing. Mike, on his knees, with a pistol in each hand, yelled the old battle-cry—*Tejanito!*

Two men took their rifles with them. They whirled and snatched at the hammers.

Right-hand, left-hand, Mike fired at them. One fell, the other whirled and ran. The third man, who had no rifle now, hurled a knife. Mike felt the shock of it glancing off of his hat crown. He knocked that fellow down with two rapid shots.

The first man up, the brave fellow who had wanted to kill *El Tejanito*, vanished around a crook in the draw. Mike got one more shot at the rifleman. He saw him stagger. Then he, too, was out of sight.

Mike got up quickly and scrambled to cross the ridge to the men's horses. He found them hobbled, grazing. He cut the hobbles of the best-looking animal and turned him back. Down in the draw, he snatched up a bridle and saddle from the pile by the fire, and fairly threw them upon the horse. He was calling to Majors all the while, but there was no answer.

He swung upon the horse and jumped him the little distance to the cave. Old Majors lay motionless. Mike picked him up bodily and hoisted him into the saddle. He jumped up behind and spurred viciously. The horse slipped on loose rocks as he climbed out of the draw.

From the elbow where the rifleman had disappeared, there came a shot. The slug whined past them. Another shot sent gravel flying. Majors was limp in Mike's encircling arms. Mike rammed the hooks to the borrowed horse. A rifle bullet buried itself in the cantle between Mike and the old man. He felt the quiver as it struck. Then the horse was safely over the ridge.

At a trot, he pushed on to where King waited. He swung off and shook Majors' swollen leg. The old man groaned and clutched at the big saddle horn.

"Hold on!" Mike snapped. "Back in a minute!"

He scooped up King's reins and threw himself into the saddle. He whirled the sorrel and charged up the hogback. Down into the draw King half-jumped, half-slid. The rifleman opened up again. Mike ignored him. At the cave he dropped off and reached inside to snatch up his carbine. Then he opened up on that elbow in the draw and the shooting stopped. He jumped onto King and sent him surging up and over the ridge; raced back to Majors, who still swayed in the saddle.

"Out o' this!" he yelled. "There's a couple, with rifles, left. An' more comin'. Do'no' when."

But they got down onto the rolling country below the foothills without meeting anyone. Dawn came and Majors looked haggardly at Mike.

"Do'no' how much more o' this I can stand," he said between his teeth. "That dam' leg feels like somebody was hittin' it with a hammer. I—I certainly owe you a lot for this. Do'no' how-come you bought into this deal—"

"Reckon not," Mike said with grimly humorous lift of mouth-corner. "Don't bother about it. Hang on! We're on Casillas' range, you know."

SUDDENLY Mike leaned a little forward, to stare with narrowed eyes at the faraway column just topping a ridge

to the southward. He reached across to catch the borrowed horse by the bits and draw him back behind a hill.

"Might be Bustos, comin' from his lick at Governor Madrigal's bullion. . . . Casillas, I figure, is waitin' at Aroyo Bonito for Sue an' the money. . . ."

He found his binoculars, still in a saddle pocket. But he could recognize none of the Mexicans in that column. He gave the glasses to Majors, who braced himself against pain long enough to stare.

"Governor Madrigal—an' soldiers!"

"Zapatazos!" Mike grunted, staring. "Let's climb out o' sight! I've lost no governors this mawnin'!"

"No! Madrigal's a friend o' mine. Hard egg, but I can handle him. If—if you got reason not to hunt the light, I'll tell him you're ridin' for me, imported from Texas."

Mike debated the question with himself. If that veteran soldier, His Excellency, Governor Felipe Madrigal, should guess that here he faced *El Tejanito*, the *buscadero* who had twice raided the sacred precincts of the Madrigal hacienda—well, it would be the Alamo all over again!

The state would have another governor, true. But thereafter, around campfires, at dingy bars along the Border, men would have to say of *El Tejanito*, of Mike Stanley, that he had died with broken record—died with one uncollected debt on his books.

It was not so much a matter of pride with Mike, that he never left unsettled a score with either friend or enemy, never forgot a favor or a blow. It was a matter of instinct. He was clear with Sue Majors now. But there remained his score with Hugo Casillas. At last, he shrugged. They rode out onto the open again and moved straight toward the Governor's column.

MADRIGAL was a big man. Six feet tall, with a chest like a barrel, with a heavy, big-chinned face and fierce, murky eyes set wide apart. He glared at the two came up. Then he recognized Majors and jerked his hand aloft with a grin.

"What is this, *amigo*?" he bellowed. "What do you do on Jerónimo range? Perhaps you can tell me something of these *banditos* who seem to snap their fingers at my officers in Flores. They

have been striking right and left in this region and Casillas talked much of getting them—always *mañana!*

"And now, as I come north myself, to look into this business, *por dios!* Up comes a soldier from the guard on my bullion train! These thieves have killed all but himself, have carried off my gold!"

Majors told him briefly of his kidnaping and of Mike's rescue. Madrigal looked narrowly at Mike. He asked him who he was. Majors answered, as he had been coached, that Mike was one of his riders.

"My thought is," Mike said to Madrigal, "that we can go to this cave and wait for Bustos, for it was Bustos who robbed your train! Yes, Julio Bustos! Friend and lieutenant of Hugo Casillas. Hugo Casillas, brother of the *jefe politico* in Flores. I was there, in Flores, I overheard them talking.

"Bustos was riding south on this raid. He told Hugo Casillas this. I had no way, then, of knowing where he went. But one of the fellows I killed last night talked of this robbery. I think that it is small wonder your officers have not caught these *banditos*. To do so would have been to catch themselves."

"Gringo! I think you are lying," Madrigal snarled. "I made Ricardo Casillas—as a carpenter makes of wood a statue of the saints. I knew the father of Hugo and Ricardo. He was my closest friend. That his sons would rob me—"

"No wonder they laugh behind your back," Mike said contemptuously. "It is nothing to me that you will not believe. I am no watchdog for you. I have done my work. Do as suits you."

"You have a long tongue . . ." Madrigal said ominously. "Have you thought that it might be cut?"

"No! For I have never seen the man who could cut it."

"Well, I will go with you to this cave. And we will see what we find. If you can show me proof that Hugo Casillas and Julio Bustos are these *banditos—bueno!* But if you cannot, I will hang you to a tree as warning to liars."

"If you find me asleep!" Mike sniffed. "I will lead you to this place, because it suits me to do so. But remember this. You may be Governor, but you have no more arms than I. And not all this pack

of yours could keep you from death if it suited me to kill you. So don't puff up when you look at me. In Texas we have a fierce snake that puffs—but cannot bite."

"I think that we shall talk more—later." Madrigal nodded grimly. "Now, Señor Majors! I will send two men to Tenedor with you. This man of yours will go on with us."

WHEN the two soldiers had ridden away with Majors, Mike and the Governor rode stirrup-to-stirrup with the column behind them. They climbed back into the mountains: A half mile from the draw with the cavern, Mike halted the soldiers. He rode forward alone.

Then from the direction of the bandit camp came the rippling sound of a shot, another and another. Mike whirled King to the cover of an arroyo as the bullets splattered gravel ahead.

The Governor met Mike as he rode back. He threw out his thirty men in a long skirmish line. The ends pushed on faster than the center, to develop the bandit position. Madrigal looked scowling at Mike.

"Well, at least there is someone there," he admitted.

A soldier, in the line topping out of an arroyo, fell sideways from his horse, shot through the face. Mike nodded.

"It would seem so!" he said, jerking his thumb toward the man.

The firing was two-sided now. Mike thought that the sides were rather equal. That probably meant that Bustos was here. Mike grinned to himself. It meant that the Governor's bullion was here, also.

Taking advantage of every tiny bit of cover, the Governor's men moved slowly toward the little arroyo of the cave.

Mike left the Mexicans. He went around to a position above the cave end of the arroyo. For it had come to him that he had felt a draft from the interior of the cavern the night before. . . . There might be another opening.

Afoot, the last hundred yards, he went crouchingly. And he found a sidehill with a black gash showing. He worked toward it, carbine ready. A man bobbed out of that gash and looked all around. Mike flattened himself behind a catclaw.

The man turned back toward the gash.

He made a hand-motion. Another man and then, one by one, a half-dozen. They were carrying what seemed to be little sticks, Mike's eyes flamed. He knew that those "sticks" were crudely smelted bullion bars, weighing perhaps five pounds each. He slid his carbine forward when ten men had come out. With his first shot, a man spun around. The others dropped to their knees. Mike rained lead at them from his cover.

They scurried, some back toward the cave, others to take cover and unsling their rifles. He moved toward them, still in shelter. Those behind brush clumps gave back. From over the rise, Mike heard deepened firing from the battle between the Governor's men and the bandits in the draw. When at last he got down to this exit of the cavern, there was not a living man in sight.

He looked swiftly around. Then he picked up one of the bars, lying beside a dead Mexican. There was a small hole under a mesquite bush. He rammed the bar into it; picked up another and another until he had five in the hole. Then he covered the spot. There were six other such bars dropped by the bandits. He threw these within the cavern.

The rattle of the firing resounded through the cavern. Flat on his belly, Mike fired into it.

HALF an hour later, soldiers found Mike lying there. They told him that the Governor now held the draw. The bandits were taken.

Mike nodded and got up. He asked if the gold had been found. The non-com shrugged. He had seen none. He squatted there to watch the cave exit.

Mike got King and rode over and down to where Madrigal examined five prisoners. He said only that some men had tried to break out of the cave's other end and that he had driven them back inside. Madrigal nodded.

"They said that the gold was in the cave. I have sent men into bring it out."

Soldiers came out of the cavern, bringing six bars. Madrigal glared at them. A lieutenant shrugged. They had found these bars at the far end of the cave. Searching with torches, they knew that no more were there. Nothing but bodies.

"It may be," Mike said, "that some got out of the cave, with gold, before I came up. Bustos, I see, was killed in the battle. . . . But Hugo Casillas—where is he?"

"I killed Bustos!" Madrigal snarled. "He surrendered. The dog! He was once my secretary. Take these yonder and shoot them," he snapped to the lieutenant, gesturing toward the prisoners.

"I think I will look to see where any others from the cave have gone," Mike said innocently. "If you hear me shoot, Excellency, send soldiers quickly."

He moved off before Madrigal could answer. But the moment he was out of sight, he roweled King to a lope. He headed toward Arroyo Bonito and as he went he grinned tightly. Madrigal was a shrewd customer. Presently he was going to begin thinking. And the thought that would come to him was that nobody had seen men coming out of that cavern, save Mike Stanley. And when he had got that far in his thinking, he would begin to wish a conversation with Mike Stanley, want more details.

"If she wasn't stopped, she has already taken the money to Arroyo Bonito," Mike said grimly to himself. "An' since Hugo wasn't at the cave with Bustos, he was likely there, waitin'."

Once on the moderately level slopes, he pushed the tough sorrel hard.

TOWARD dusk, Mike heard the clink of an iron shoe on rock. He pulled in. Presently he heard the thudding of hoofs. He reined back softly behind a great boulder. A mumble of voices came to him. One was a man's, the other a woman's.

He spurred out, a deadly, grinning figure with Colt in each hand. There were the brothers Casillas and between them Sue Majors, her hands tied to the saddle horn. From Hugo Casillas' pommel hung a buckskin bag.

"Yup!" Mike barked at them. "The gates of hell are creaking, *hombres!* Pinch your ears!"

Their hands leaped up. All three gaped as at a ghost. Mike reholstered his left-hand pistol. He kneed King over, twitched the buckskin bag from Hugo's saddle.

He turned to Sue Majors. Holding the

drop on Ricardo and Hugo, he freed her hands and passed the bag of currency.

"Yo' father's home by now," he drawled. He spun his Colt on the trigger guard, regarding the brothers with narrowed eyes. "I reckon ever'thing's settled except to—"

"Don't shoot!" Hugo said thickly. "I will buy my life—the money we took from you, I will repay, doubled."

"Doubled is my thought, too," Mike nodded with face like a rock. "Ricardo? Why do not you, also, beg your life?"

"I do not beg!" the younger man said contemptuously.

"Then"—Mike grinned—"I give you your life. Turn back and ride as if the devil sat upon your shoulder, as you came."

Ricardo dropped his hands and whirled his horse. He vanished with a drumming of hoofs. Hugo Casillas licked his lips.

"Will you match speed with me? With *El Tejanito*?" Mike inquired of him gently. "I will reholster my pistol."

"*El Tejanito*!" It was the girl and Hugo together.

"*El Tejanito*!" he nodded grimly. "What? You will not try for your life, Hugo? Then I fear I must let you go. It would be like killing a tied calf. Straight ahead! And ride fast!"

When the second Casillas had vanished, Mike looked at the staring, white-faced girl.

"You—you're the outlaw . . . and you let him go? And they say of you that you never let a score go unpaid."

"Let's go. It's a tol'able ride to Tenedor."

They made the miles, at first through darkness, then under the moonlight, very silently. Mike grinned a little, as he looked ahead. The girl watched him covertly.

"YONDER'S the west line," Sue said softly, near midnight. "I—I never thought I'd see it again. . . . Why did you do it? Risk your life in our behalf? I thought at first it was because you knew that Hugo Casillas was behind this, and intended revenge on him. But you let him go, unhurt; you let him go, without troubling even to get from him the money he took from you in Flores."

"I did it for you," he told her, reining in to stare across and down at her. "I'm a sudden sort o' hairpin, I reckon. When I looked up, there in Flores' street, an' saw you— Well—"

"Well?" she prompted him, after a full minute.

"I'm leavin' you now. No, I won't come to the house. I figure this country's too hot to hold *El Tejanito*. But, before I go, I'd like to ask you to give me one thing. . . . That necklace you're wearin'."

"Oh!" she said softly. "Oh! Why, of course!"

She took it quickly from her neck, a thin golden chain with a pendant gold coin in golden rim. She put it in his hand.

"*Vaya con dios!*" she called after him as he rode south.

He held the necklace as he rode, working at it. He came into the trail by which they had come from Flores to Tenedor. The trail on which lived the woman whom he had kissed ten years before. He got the ten-dollar gold piece out of its holding rim. He nodded.

"Now I'll head for the Bawdeh without a promise unpaid. I'll pick up that bullion an' cash it at Laredo. Lucky Sue had this gold piece, to give to my ol' *querida*. . . . For I'll see no money this side the River."

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THE LAUGHING SKULLS

By JACK SMALLEY

In the shadow of the Hindu Kush slumbered the City of the Laughing Skulls. Caravans shunned its grisly walls; fearful of the whispered legends of its silent streets, and the lovely, lynx-eyed white Queen who ruled that lost outpost of blond men.

AFTER kicking and cajoling a stubborn she-camel halfway across Afghanistan, at the risk of my neck, and then finding that the Oriental rug I wanted wasn't for sale, can you blame me for cursing my unlucky *kismet*?

For look you, Timothy Elroy is a name that stands for a rug buyer who gets what he seeks, and to return to Peshawar empty-handed was not a happy thing to think about. Yet here I was on my way home, while that precious Kirmanshah rug still hung in Alam Gul's tribal room. I sat down beside the trail and cursed that mangy, splay-footed camel, railed at a corn chaffed by my slippers, and assigned Alam and his rug to the seven hottest fires in Hades. Then I felt better.

It was at this auspicious moment I first heard the voice of the young man who came from nowhere with a return ticket, and drew me into an adventure that added more gray hairs to the sparse fringe around my bald spot. He was singing as he climbed a rise in the ground that hid him from sight, and his ditty was fashioned upon the tune of *The Shade of the Old Apple Tree*. It went thusly:

*When they needed a man to encourage the van,
Or harass the foe from the rear,
Or storm a redoubt, they had only to shout
For Abdul, the Bul-Bul Amir!*

The gusty song stopped. Outlined against the clear blue sky was a fellow on a mule. He stared down at me, and the mule cocked one ear forward.

Now, it isn't healthy to warble a ditty in English while trekking through this man's country. English are infidels, pig eaters, and money changers, all hateful in the sight of a Moslem Afghan. More, the burning of Kabul nearly a hundred years ago, when the British took revenge on the capital of Afghanistan, might have hap-

pened but yesterday in the memories of these people.

So the chap stopped as if he had committed a social error, which he had, and waited to see what I would do.

I laughed, and yelled:

"All together now on that second chorus, Abdul!"

With a hoot of delight he kicked the mule and came charging down the slope. He jumped from the saddle and grabbed my hand.

"By the tangled beard of Allah," he exclaimed, "if it's not the carpet snatcher! I heard you were trying to out-talk old Gul into parting with his priceless royal rug."

"Who are you?" I gasped.

"Jim Boyd—of Brooklyn. I've been teaching Gul's soldiers how to operate five machine guns given 'em by Russia. I've got a wad of rupees with me that would choke the sacred white elephant. Man, I'm off to the fleshpots of civilization!"

His white teeth sparkled in a dark, youthful face as he grinned at me and my mangy she-camel. Gloom vanished before Jim Boyd's infectious smile. He wanted to know my name, was calling me "Tim" in five minutes, and had everything organized for our journey back to India, "I figured on joining a caravan," he said, "but look here. It only takes two critters to make a caravan, so we'll make one of our own—your camel and my mule!"

HE took up the march, and years dropped from my weary shoulders as Jim entertained me with accounts of his adventures. He had been shipped into Alam Gul's domain with the machine guns. Five, there were, until the evening before, when raiders made off with two of them.



"But what does that chief want with machine guns?" I asked.

"Why, shucks, Tim, that gives him an edge on all the other khans in this neck of the woods. Besides, he's been having bo-coop trouble with the hillmen. Gul gets most of his sheep and wool up toward the Pamirs, and loses half to the bandits along the route."

Then we fell to talking of that sweet land behind the Statue of Liberty, and dusk fell while we were yet several miles from the walled serai where we planned to spend the night. No doubt there would be other caravans bedding down there, banded together for protection. We hastened our steps.

A whistle broke the stilly, soft twilight.

Jim cast a glance at me, and slipped his hand within the sash at his waist, where a gun nestled. I shrugged.

"Prob'ly a bird in those mulberry thickets," I said.

"I never saw a bird wearin' a astrakan cap," Jim declared, and pulled out his gun.

From the trees emerged a tall fellow in a high fur cap, carrying a rifle. He stepped out into the road and waited for us. The mule's ears see-sawed at the fellow, as if wig-wagging a message.

My camel plodded behind, and I turned to see that the beast was following. Two men were closing in upon us from the rear!

A command in Pushtu rang out from the fellow up front.

"Lay down thy arms, infidels!"

A fourth shadow took shape as a man. We were cleverly ambushed, covered on every side by menacing rifles. I had a considerable sum of gold in my belt, but I had no desire to stack my life against it. Jim, however, was of another mind.

He leaped forward and felled the mule with a terrific blow from the butt of his gun. Yanking me down, he dropped behind the stunned animal and fired at the man in the road.

In the gathering darkness, that leaping, charging figure was a difficult target, and the valley rang with four shots from Jim's gun before the man pitched forward.

I cursed my stupidity at leaving my own heavy weapon in the pack on my camel. The way had been long and hot, and feeling secure in Jim Boyd's company, I'd

shed every extra pound of weight.

In the midst of my regrets a body descended on me, and two others hurtled from the rear upon Jim. I struck out savagely, expecting any moment to feel the shock of a bullet or the burning thrust of a knife, Jim's yells of rage subsided in a gurgle just as a flying heel caught me a clout on the side of the head, and I lost my senses in a blaze of stars.

THE jolting of a big-wheeled cart under me was my next sensation. It was so dark I thought I must be blinded, until gradually the dim outline of a man's back on the seat showed against the dark sky. A man was walking beside the cart, talking to the driver in tones loud enough to carry above the creaking wooden wheels.

"By my honor, O Crooked One, she said nought of a fat man," the bandit declared.

"True, but he was a comrade of Yimbhad. 'Both shall be taken to the Laughing Skulls," the driver called back. "I pray she strangles that young one."

I tried to raise my hand to my aching head, and could not. Legs and arms were tightly bound. By rolling on my side, I could make out the dim form of Jim beside me.

He surprised me by laughing softly.

"Get that, Tim? That driver would like to see Yimbhad strangled. I'll bet I kicked the teeth out of him."

Then it dawned on me that Yimbhad was the Afghan version of Jim Boyd. I began to think clearer, and recalled the mention of the Laughing Skulls. The phrase no longer puzzled me—it sent chills up and down my bruised spine.

The Laughing Skulls! Avoided by the northern hillman as if it were a leprous domain, the City of the Laughing Skulls was a place accursed. Tales of this weird and unholy spot drifted through the frontier provinces from time to time, each bringing some new and more monstrous horror ascribed to the place. To those who scoffed at these stories came the black looks of those who had been near there.

"I swear by the Prophet," the tale-bearers would say, "that this is so. Round about the walls are the skulls of dead men, and no one lives in the city. And the skulls waggle their jaws and laugh! Laughter that freezes the marrow,

and brings down a curse upon you. Wah! It is so—my wife died in childbirth the day I passed beside the Laughing Skulls!”

As the cart bumped along through the night, those yarns didn't seem so fantastic as when heard at high noon in a bustling bazaar. Did these highwaymen plan some diabolical torture in this forbidden and deserted city where there were skulls that laughed? Certainly there must be some reason for taking us alive, even at the cost of one of their men. And who was the “she” they mentioned?

All these thoughts only made my head ache the more. Then the jolting stopped. Excited voices were raised in the road ahead of us.

Looking under the driver's seat, I could see men with torches. The Crooked One twisted about, flung blankets over Jim and me, and said:

“Speak not!”

Apparently there were five soldiers out there. They wanted to know what was in the cart. Were these louse-in-fested hill-men carrying stolen sheep?

“We carry the bodies of two tribesmen,” the driver sung out. Over his shoulder he addressed us in low tones.

“Lie still, or you shall be dead men in all truth!”

THE light of torches played over us. A hand grasped my slippered foot and wiggled it. I had sense enough to lie rigid, for a hillman on the other side of the cart held a rifle at my neck.

Satisfied, they allowed us to proceed. Jim Boyd spoke in my ear.

“Don't that beat the luck? Those were Alam Gul's men—I recognized the voice of one. But I could feel the prick of a knife in my side all the time they were looking us over. If they'd pulled the blanket off and seen my face—good night!”

The stars and moon came out in the sky, and lighted the road. We followed a trail that climbed always up, deeper into the hills, until Jim and I lay like two sardines packed against the rear gate of the cart.

Finally our captors halted for a rest. They unbound the cords on our wrists and arms, a sign that they no longer feared meeting with enemy tribesmen.

JIM and I were able to sit up and look about. Our guards were growing tired, but they could not change with the driver. The Crooked One had a stiff leg. It must have been near midnight when the mules were halted for the last time.

We were on a broad, flat plateau, like a landing between the hills we had climbed, and the mountains rising beyond, jagged and forbidding against the moonlit sky.

In the center of the plateau was what appeared to be a ring of spires. They were like colossal fingers pointing upward. And at the base of them the silvery light gleamed on dead-white walls.

Dread possessed me. The chill night wind sought out the rents in my robe, and rustled the dry grass about us. Still I stared at those walls, trying to pierce the gloom, seeing in that far corner of the mind where facts mate with dreams and breed nightmares, the picture that fitted this place. And then I realized beyond all doubt that before me was the City of the Laughing Skulls.

Few words were spoken by the guards. They tethered the mules, built a small fire, and sat down with their stern faces turned toward the distant walls.

Suddenly an unearthly laughter came to us on the wind. The small hairs of my scalp lifted, and my throat tightened. Deeper than the yapping laugh of hyenas, it rose and fell as the breeze veered and changed. Devils laughing in hell. The damned laughing back at them.

Jim Boyd's fingers gripped my arm convulsively.

“Dead men are joking,” he muttered.

I looked at our guards. They were cringing, silent and afraid. I saw the lips of one move, as he repeated the ninety and nine beautiful names of Allah to fortify his soul against the *djinns* that inhabited the City of the Laughing Skulls.

IT was no deserted city we entered the next morning. The Crooked One drove the cart briskly up to the walls and called a greeting to the sentinels: I looked with curiosity upon the rows and rows of skulls that decorated the walls. In the sunlight the bleached relics of dead men were more ugly than eerie.

In fact, the living people within the city surprised me more than the skulls. Tall,

blond, and blue-eyed—it seemed incredible to find them in this land of dark skins and black hair. Their dialect was unknown to me, and just as unintelligible, it seemed, to the two guards. The driver, however, conversed with the men who came to meet us.

Gold changed hands. A blue-eyed giant lifted Jim and me out of the cart and a companion cut the thongs about our ankles.

"Farewell," grinned the Crooked One, looking at me. "May thy shadow never grow less, O Mountain of Woe! I leave thee and thy friend to the care of unbelievers. These Iskanders know not the value of dead jackals, for they paid me well for you. Hah!"

Iskanders! I stared after the retreating cart. That was the name given to a lost tribe in the Hindu Kush, fabled descendants of soldiers of Alexander the Great! But in spite of my astonishment, I did not miss a most significant event. Five heavily armed Iskanders watched the cart until it left the plateau, then set after it at a dog trot. If the Crooked One and his followers lived to spend their gold, then my name could be mentioned with dung heaps.

Jim and I were taken down the main street to a clay-brick dwelling. Curious eyes followed us as we went. I took note of another strange fact: there was not a woman to be seen. Who, then, was this mysterious "she" mentioned by the Crooked One?

Within five minutes we found out.

Two warriors stepped aside from the door and we were pushed forward into a high-ceilinged room.

RECLINING on a couch of brocaded silk, her raven head propped on the palm of a small hand, was a girl. Large, dark eyes regarded us steadfastly from beneath long lashes, and brows that were Oriental in their curve.

For a long minute she stared impersonally at both of us, her eyes studying, appraising. Then she raised herself slowly to a sitting posture. It didn't need Jim's long sigh of admiration to tell me she was beautiful. Slim, she was, with a form to win the senses of any wanderer of the world. The clinging, diaphanous silk rustled faintly as she moved.

She spoke a few words to the captain

of the guard, pointing a slim finger at me. There was a question in her voice. At his answer, she shrugged and turned her face toward Jim. She'd dismissed me without another thought, but I was willing enough to escape attention. It was obvious that this girl ruler of a lost tribe was satisfied with the man she now held with her gaze. Her eyes glowed warmly, and she smiled. "You are astonish at all thees?" she asked suddenly.

Jim Boyd gulped. So did I. She could speak our lingo!

"That is what I think," she added slyly. "I hear of this han'som mans, who can shoot the guns that go *bing-bing-bing*. I have need of you, Sahib. You show my soldiers how to make them shoot, also. Eh?"

"It was your outfit that stole those machine guns!" blurted Jim.

"Sir! I am Roora, Queen of Iskanda!" she cried, her eyes narrowing. "No man calls me thief!"

Jim Boyd took a step forward, impulsively. The young fellow was actually blushing with shame. But a big, blond warrior shoved a spear across Jim's chest, and halted him.

Roofa laughed, and waved the man away.

"I had need of those guns," she said, her mood changing. "Many caravans pass near the City of Laughing Skulls, my frien'. They go to the Pamirs for the fat-tail sheep. They go far, far, to Turkestan, for silks and gold. When they return, we kill them."

She made this statement in such a matter-of-fact manner that I could hardly believe my ears. Yet this kitten must have sharp claws, to rule the wild men of the mountains.

"Your frien', he will be made useful also," she said, flirting her hand toward me, but never taking her eyes from Jim's face. "You shall stay with me long, long times." Her voice sank to a soft melodious purr.

"I make you ver', ver' happy, Jim."

WE did as we were ordered. There was no way out of it. For three days Jim Boyd tried to ding the rudiments of machine gunnery into the thick skulls of these yellow-haired heathen. I was al-

lowed to wander around the city, but never outside the walls.

The more I learned about the place, the more mystified I became. It was the strangest kingdom a man ever set eyes on. The woman, Roora, ruled her blond outlaws in a fashion to make the Amir envious, and it was woe betide the man who crossed her. What spell she held over them, I don't know. Perhaps they could realize that she had more brains and cunning than any six men put together, but more likely it was the fear of the supernatural that made them her slaves; those laughing skulls, I mean. Twice since coming as prisoners to the city Jim and I had heard that uncanny sound, cackling out over the plateau in a hideous cacaphony of sound.

Jim was profoundly affected by that demon laughter. For hours after it came, he would sit on the edge of his rude cot, unable to sleep. We shared a room together in one wing of the palace, where we could be near when the Queen wanted us. Daytimes Jim worked with his machine guns, wasting good cartridges on targets outside the walls. Roora had four books, loot from an English caravan, which she made me read to her afternoons. The girl had an alert mind, and though she could not read or write English, she had plenty of savvy.

ONE afternoon Jim was summoned from his class in freshman gunnery, and hailed with me before Roora.

"Now what has that dame got on her mind?" Jim asked uneasily, as we approached the room. "I'm getting fed up with her bossing, Tim. I'd like to turn her over my knee and spank her. But I got to hand it to her, at that. The kid's sure got nerve!"

"Why don't you play up to her?" I demanded. "She's goofy about you, Jimmy. You could have her eating out of your hand."

"Not for mine," he said emphatically. "She's punch-drunk with power, that girl. If I get me a woman, I'll wear the crown. But sometimes I wish she wasn't a queen."

Roora was walking fretfully up and down the room, like a caged panther. By the door stood the bald, tongueless brute who was her bodyguard. Jimmy called

him the Hairless Ape, and it fitted him, except for the eyes. They sparkled with too much knowledge.

"I have work for you," Roora said abruptly, and seated herself. "A scout brings word of a hunting caravan of Englis'men, close by the border. Thees mans have guns, powder, much that we need. Timti, you will talk with them, make the nice promises. Get them here where my mans can take care of them."

A nice job! I began to see red.

"If you think I'll lure a bunch of white men into this den, you're crazy!" I burst out.

Slowly her lids closed, until she regarded me through slits. The soft beauty of her face vanished, leaving a mask of suppressed rage and hatred. The hand on her knee clenched until the knuckles showed white. The ruby signet ring she wore on her middle finger blazed balefully in a shaft of sunlight.

"Agra, take him out," she said, addressing the Hairless Ape. "If he screams loudly enough, I may allow him to change his mind."

"Wait!" cried Jim. "If anybody lays hands on my partner, you'll learn no more about machine guns from me!"

"Yimbhad will join you, Agra," she murmured, and reached for the fruit bowl.

The Hairless Ape had to call six guards before he got us both into the courtyard. Jim and I were spread-eagled on the ground, each of us with a foot tied to a stake. I knew what was coming. They'd drive a wedge down that stake, and as it split, it would draw the thong tighter about our feet. It was a slow way of severing a foot.

"This won't get us anywhere," I said to Jim. "Let's give in."

But Jim didn't know exactly what was coming. "No," he said. "I'll croak first."

The bald head of Agra glistened with sweat. He fixed the wedge in place and swung the sledge. The cord around my ankle cut into the flesh.

At the next blow I let out a yell. Agra stood back, hands on hips, and opened his mouth with a blood-curdling laugh that shaded even the merriment of the skulls. Then I saw Roora on the second floor of her mud brick palace, looking down at us.

"I'll go!" I howled.

She raised her hand, and Agra freed us, grinning. I had to lean on Jim's shoulder when we hobbled back into the palace.

WITH six of the Iskanders, I was to happen upon the English caravan, tell them of an imaginary paradise of big game, and lure them across the border within striking distance of Roor's men. She had it all thought out. I was to take my escort the next morning. If I tried any double-crossing, the six Iskanders would shoot me full of lead and run like hell.

Jim and I talked it over that night, sitting in the shadow of one of the giant rock spires behind the palace.

"We've got to make a getaway," I said. "I'll try to give those guides the slip tomorrow, and bring help."

"Alam Gul would be glad to chip in the fight," Jim mused. "His trade caravans have to cross this plateau up the trail to Mongolia. But I don't think he could make his warriors come near this haunted place."

Men were approaching, so we got up and went to the palace. No use wasting our time trying to find a way to escape these watchful Iskanders, or to climb the wall that hemmed in the city and the grotesque stone fingers behind the palace.

Jim turned in early, but Roor's wanted me to read to her.

I took the book, which was *Pilgrim's Progress*, and went to her room. She acted as if nothing had happened, seemed, in fact, to have forgotten entirely the torture of that afternoon. I sat down and opened the book. In the middle of a page I glanced up, and noticed that her ring was missing.

While I droned along, my mind raced. Her men knew that ring; it was a symbol of her office. Where had she put it? She must have washed her hands and laid it aside, forgetting to replace it.

"I am thirsty, your majesty," I croaked. "Will you excuse me a moment?"

She nodded. I doubt if her mind was on that story. I got up and went into the hall. Glancing back, I saw she hadn't moved.

HER sleeping quarters and dressing-room were up a flight of stairs. I ran up them noiselessly. At the top I

paused. Another series of stairs led to the roof, and I looked up just in time to see the legs of the Hairless Ape just coming into view.

Slipping into Roor's room, I waited until he had gone on down. Then I looked around. On the stone bench that held a clay jug of water lay the ruby ring!

I snatched it up and went downstairs. There was no time to go find Jimmy in his room, for I heard Roor give an impatient call for me.

The guard at the door looked at me and jerked a thumb toward the throne room. But I gave him a knowing wink, and whatever interpretation he placed on it, he let me pass out the door.

Turning the corner, I hurried as fast as I could for the gate. There I flashed the ring at the sentinels. They grouped around, talking excitedly, and I pretended high impatience.

"Roor—Timti—" I said, and then pointed imperiously through the gate. They didn't know what I wanted, except that the Queen had given me some order, and let me have her ring to gain my passage beyond the gate.

While they were buzzing over the question, I walked haughtily through, and started to follow the wall. At the first turn I scurried for a ravine, ran along it like a scared jack-rabbit, and hid behind the first good-sized cluster of rocks I came to.

Another night had settled over the plateau, and before the moon came up I must be down among the hills. On that level benchland I could be seen for miles. I looked back, and saw men pouring out of the gate. It was still light enough to make them out as they ran along the glimmering white walls, beneath the rattling skulls of the dead men.

I shrank closer to cover. In fifteen minutes it was dark enough for me to make another run for it. Once I thought I was done for. About four Iskanders appeared in the gloom, running toward me. I charged directly toward them, pointing with outstretched arm, and yelling hoarsely. They thought I had sighted the quarry, turned around, and dashed in the direction I indicated. If they'd waited a moment, they'd have seen me whirl around and run. But they didn't, praise Allah! And when

dawn came I was in the lowlands, asleep in a clump of oleander trees.

ALAM GUL refused to believe my outlandish tale. Oh, he was the soul of polite attention, but from his expression he thought I had suffered a touch of the sun. Not only was it preposterous to suppose a woman, unveiled and unashamed, ruling a city of men, but there was also the matter of the curse upon the place. No one dared go near the Laughing Skulls, therefore there was no one in the long-deserted city. Plain as the nose on your face.

But when I showed them the broken flesh of my ankle, and went into detail about the two machine guns and ammunition stolen from Gul, and how Jim Boyd had been impressed to teach those rascals how to shoot them at passing caravans, Alam Gul changed his tune.

Once convinced, the village buzzed with activity as the khan's orders were carried out. The machine guns, strapped to mules, headed a hastily organized column of men. The khan lent me one of his horses, and we rode with the squad of advance scouts.

In spite of our haste it was dark before we reached the plateau, and drew up in sight of the City of Laughing Skulls.

"If we are to save Jim Boyd, we must surprise them," I counseled. "Roora the Queen will slay him for spite."

Alam Gul was no less desirous of rescuing Jim, for he owed that happy-go-lucky adventurer much, and had a real affection in his tough old heart for the lad. He called his followers together.

"Do not fear the Laughing Skulls," he said. "Yonder are infidels, misbegotten sons of white-haired unbelievers. They allow a woman to rule them. They have raided our village, stolen guns from us. We seek revenge, and the rescue of Yimbhad, with whom I have exchanged turbans as a token of friendship. Slay them to the last man!"

Such was Gul's speech, and it stirred every warrior in that grim circle about us. Forgotten was their fear of the Evil Eye, and they advanced boldly. The city loomed up before us, until we could hear the gruesome rattling of the jaw bones in the skulls, swinging loosely by their leather thongs.

ALONG the base of the wall stood a line of Gul's men, stooping over. Onto their backs mounted the second wave, forming human ladders reaching up. These raiders knew their business well. Several ropes with iron hooks were thrown over the wall.

Then it came, the sound that turned blood to water and the strength of men to sand. Welling upward as if from a vast cavern came the laughter of the skulls, to roll out over the plateau in a tremendous voice. Peal after peal of horrible laughter sent the khan's men tumbling from the wall, rushing in a mad, frenzied scramble away from the source of that gigantic jest.

I was knocked underfoot, trampled on. Cries of fright rang out around me. The khan's curses and yells went unheeded. Like chaff before a wind, the men fled before that ironic laughter of the devil gods.

No shot had been fired. The city was quiet again; the sound had ceased. I stood alone on the plain.

Creeping on hands and knees, I reached the wall and crouched against it. Something brushed my shoulder, and I jerked away, stifling a scream with my fist. By the beard of Allah, my knees could hardly support me! But it was only a rope—one of those thrown over the wall by Gul's soldiers.

Cursing myself for a weak-livered fool, I grasped the rope. The knots gave me hand holds, and I pulled myself up. Bargaining for rugs in the bazaar is no way to keep the muscles hard, and my arms were played out by the time I had hoisted my bulk onto the wall.

A skull chattered its teeth beside me in the cold wind.

LYING flat, I saw men pass by, relieving those at the gate in an orderly fashion, and the men coming off duty dispersed. A look-out fifty feet away, undiscernible in the gloom, called down to the men at the gate. I judged he was reporting that the raiders had disappeared.

Disengaging the iron hook, I reversed it and slid gently down inside the wall. Thanks to my exploring, I knew the way without hesitation.

This time I entered the City of Laughing Skulls a free agent, armed with a

dagger and a Russian repeating revolver in my sash. Slipping behind the palace, in the jet-black shadows of the towering rocks behind it, I came to the window of Jim's room.

How to signal him bothered me for a moment, until I remembered the song he had been singing when we first met. I hummed the first few bars. After a hushed interval, I heard a chuckle, and:

*Oh, the sons of the prophet were valiant and brave,
And quite unaccustomed to fear,
But the bravest by far, in the ranks of the shah,
Was Abdul, the Bul-Bul Amir!*

I climbed through the window and felt my way to Jim's cot. He was bound as tight as an Egyptian mummy, and it was minutes before my sharp dagger could slit the cords.

"Alam Gul is outside with his men," I whispered. "That damnable laughter scared 'em off."

"Well, I've got an idea, old bean, that we can disconnect that loud speaker," Jim returned. "Come on—easy does it, now!"

We opened his door a trifle, and peered out. No one was in view along the corridor: It was too dangerous to converse, even in whispers, so we traversed the hall in silence, our bared feet making no noise.

The hum of voices reached us through a closed door. Men were in the council room with the Queen, and a man stood on guard. It was late, and he was sleepy. His head had tilted until his chin rested on his chest.

JIM had a firm grip around the fellow's neck before he could wake from his doze. Then it was too late to utter a sound. His body, threshing on the stone floor, alarmed no one. When it was done we hauled him into a dark room, and hurried up the stairs.

Jim flitted ahead like a shadow, and I puffed in his wake. Past Roora's room on the second floor we went, and up the last flight of steps onto the roof. The waning moon showed a box-like structure atop the roof, and as we halted in front of it, the Hairless Ape stepped forth.

He was as surprised as we were. Jimmy has the quickest physical reaction of any man I ever saw; he launched out with his

fist while I was still blinking. The bald man hissed in his tongueless mouth and staggered from the blow. A curved blade swished from his girdle, but before the point could come up, my dagger slid between his ribs.

His long arms tried to encircle me, but I dodged and he stumbled forward, slipped on the steps, and rolled down to the landing.

Groans, and a feeble stirring, came from the darkness down there. Jim and I turned away and went to the small room. Inside, an oil cresset burned on a shelf, dimly lighting the interior of the mysterious compartment.

A huge trumpet, carved from wood and covered with fantastic designs, rested on supports. Shaped like a megaphone, the large end was set into a round opening in the wall of the room, in the direction of the rocks behind the palace.

"By the beard of Allah!" I cried in amazement.

And thunderously came the cry—"AL-LAH!"

My lips had been near the mouth of the speaking trumpet, and the word, flung out and magnified, had been cast back by the most astounding echo imaginable. The secret of the laughing skulls was revealed!

"I've got it!" Jim exclaimed excitedly. "Gul's men are afraid of that laughter. Call them to the fight with that same echo!"

HE took his hand off the mouthpiece. I stepped forward, and in the language of the Afghans called out:

"Attack!"

Over the plains rang the word, clear and intelligible, even though magnified a thousand-fold. The peculiar formation of those rock spires acted like a sounding board for the slightest sound from the secret trumpet. How jealously Roora must have guarded that knowledge! Only she and the tongueless Agra must have known the magic that produced that unholy laughter, and held her men in awe and subjection.

Again I spoke, separating each word with sufficient pause. "Alam Gul, thou shalt conquer!"

Men ran from the council room into the street. We heard them shouting their alarm. Their own gods had forsaken

them! The mysterious voice was promising aid to the enemy!

I could picture the confusion and dismay of the hapless Queen. If she told them the voice was man-made, her hold on the blond sons of Iskander was forever lost. And if she did not, the city would fall before Alam Gul's superior forces.

A shrill cry whirled me about.

ROORA stood there, one hand clutching her breast as if in mortal pain. She stepped to the edge and looked down.

Then her arms stiffened, and she poised. Jim grabbed her just as she was swaying outward, toward the limbo that had claimed her power.

The girl squirmed from his arms and dashed down the stairs. Jim followed her at a bound, and I came after, avoiding the dead body of Agra. Torches flared in the hall below, and I stared down upon the scene. At the door to the throne room were four Iskanders, holding Roor. They were revenging themselves upon the girl whose dread magic had been turned against them.

Jim flung himself upon them, wrested a sword from one, and swung it. I drew my revolver and aimed where I stood. A second man dropped. The other two turned and fled. They were cut down in the doorway by Alam Gul's men.

Jim picked up Roor and carried her into the throne room, tender as a shepherd with a lamb. The khan appeared, wiping

blood from a scimitar, his eyes red with the lust of killing.

"The voice—" he cried hoarsely. "It was the word of the Prophet!"

I let him believe it. Alam Gul had heard the voice of his gods, and who was I to tell him otherwise?

IT would be to my taste, my friends, if I could relate the ending of this tale. But a rug merchant must be about his business, if he's to keep up his end of things in the quest for carpets to satisfy the dull wives of bored millionaires.

I can only give you the facts, and let you judge. When Alam Gul and I entered the throne room it was empty. Jim Boyd and Roor were gone, and a secret door stood open.

It is many months since I returned to my bazaar in Peshawar, with an escort to guard the royal Kirmanshah rug that once belonged to Alma Gul. And of Jim Boyd, and the olive-skinned girl who ruled the City of Laughing Skulls, I have had not a word.

Yet strange stories have come to the back room of my bazaar in the city by Khyber Pass, passed on from tribesmen who claim that the skulls have laughed again, and that smoke has been seen rising from a house in the deserted village on the plateau. But whatever is the meaning of these stories, one thing is certain. It was not Jim's *kismet* to be ruled by a woman!



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BRONCO GUNS

By JOHN STARR

Tinhorn and trail boss. Gun to gun they met in the dusty street. Friends—'til a tinselled dancehall queen had primed the triggers of their reluctant Colts.

ALVAREZ was half-asleep in the rear of the Golden Dollar when the first clash came. His arms lay negligently crossed over shoulder holsters. He stifled a yawn. Things were getting too damn quiet. Now there was that place he'd heard about down outside of El Paso Springs where . . .

Then Alvarez saw them and sat up—

quick. With the rapid deftness of long practice, one of his hands snaked inside his coat. Eyes, half smiling with a sort of come-on gleam, took in the two men at the low-cut doors, raked the bar, went back to the two.

For Alvarez knew these men. The angular one with a lock of stiff black hair over his forehead and the wasp waist fitted into

a shaped frock coat—that was Cut Dolton, house gambler of the Golden Dollar. And he of the brick-red face was Hooraw Stevens, trail boss of the T-Z spread. They had bumped just inside the door.

"*Quien sabe? Quien sabe?*" Alvarez murmured to himself. "I smell smoke. Si . . ."

Cut Dolton was a strange man. He was quick, hard, like the faces of the cards he dealt over a stud table. He never talked much. The word that came most from his lips was the crisp, curt "cut" as he passed the deck. His eyes, his hands, his voice, were like a whip—they cut. Except—except when he looked at his wife, Marcia, who danced in the Golden Dollar. Then . . .

Then he'd whirl on a hombre and palely curse him in a hoarse whisper for seeing what happened to him when he looked at that woman he loved. A strange gent, Cut Dolton. And as fast and as ready with a gun as he was with a card deck.

Dolton studied the big cowman who had jostled him in entering. "Mister, that door's plenty wide. Do you need all of it?"

Hooraw Steve pushed back a sombrero coated with the dust of the trail. The T-Z boss had the foghorn voice of a braggart. He had a rep as a driver and a man-breaker. It was his boast that no hombre ever worked in his spread that he couldn't whip. Or in any other spread, either, that came down the Sagonde Trail.

Hooraw spat out his cigaret without putting a hand to it. "Stranger, I'm a big man, an' I need elbow-room. Them that don't like my way can—"

Cut Dolton looked at the pony of red-eye he was carrying, then downed it. It was one of many he had been pouring that afternoon. The stud dealer always drank heavily till sundown, when his game started. Then he took none. But until he got those cards in his hands—the touch of them seemed to soothe him—Cut was ornery.

"I don't like it," he snapped. "What can I do about it?"

Hooraw wiped splay-fingered hands on the sides of his trousers. He suddenly looked up and down the bar and around the dance-hall. The place was too quiet. Because every hombre inside the

Golden Dollar was silent, eyes locked on those two who had tangled. Spurs rattled on the old wooden sidewalk without and Hooraw's hands pushed in. Those T-Z hands were hard hombres, gun-slingers of the first water. Hooraw laughed shortly.

He said, "Figger it out for yoreself, mister."

From around the Golden Dollar, soft-footed, hard-faced hombres advanced. They didn't walk straight out. They didn't seem to be going any place in particular. But their eyes never strayed from Hooraw Steve and his tough trail bunch. And there was something impersonal, stony about those eyes. Like eyes that appraised a target. For they were the gun-aces hired to protect the Golden Dollar!

Everything about Cut Dolton seemed to get sharper. His face and his shoulders under the black coat and the lines around his mouth and the tips of his fingers that stretched like spikes, flexing. "Are you asking for it?" he queried softly.

Hooraw Steve blinked, slowly. He was no killer. Never yet had he pulled a gun till forced. "Not hardly," he stated in a flat voice. "But I might if the sign was right."

Cut put his hands down then. "I call bets—not make 'em."

"Suits me," Hooraw Stevens shrugged. "Makes me thirsty tuh argue anyway."

Cut Dolton started back toward a table to refill his glass. Hooraw Steve, with his spread at his back, swaggered toward the bar. And some place in the Golden Dollar a man swore softly and laughed.

"I like tuh see a bluff called!"

Hooraw Steve halted and slowly started to pivot his six feet of tiger form. Cut Dolton had his hands flat on a table and took them off to put them in front of him as he, too, turned.

Goldy Baca himself, one of the brothers who ran the combined barroom, dancing hall and gambling tables, entered the breach with a flash of his gold-toothed smile. He seized Hooraw Steve's hand and pumped it vigorously.

"Ha-ha! Glad tuh see yuh—"

The T-Z segundo turned slowly, reluctantly, from the spare-framed gambler. His brick face glowered, stung to a flush.

"If anybody figgers I'm—"

"'Course not," the elder Baca brother

cut in. "Step to the bar, yuh an' your boys. First round's on the house!"

The clash was averted then. Alvarez sat back and lit a fresh cigaret with just a bit of marijuana in it. "*Dios*; what is thees place coming to?" he asked himself.

HOORAW STEVE bellied up against the bar and shoved his trail-soiled hat still farther back from his face. After the first round he bought drinks for his hands, then called for a bottle for himself. It was only one more day's drive down the trail to put the herd on the railroad siding chutes.

Over at his lone table, Cut Dolton sat. Ever and again his eyes strayed over the tops of the bat-wing doors, measuring the descent of the sun. He poured himself another drink. Then he meticulously drew down the white cuffs of his shirt sleeves. Cut was awful particular about those cuffs. They had to be spotless.

The blind man who played his guitar at the Golden Dollar thumped his strings. The piano tinkled a tune. From the back of the dance-hall wing Marcia came, then, to answer her dance cue. Cut Dolton lowered a drink and watched her. So did Hooraw Steve.

She flashed into the dance alone, in the center of the spur-scuffed floor. The spangles of her low-cut dress shimmered and tinkled faintly. The soft guitar hummed. And Cut Dolton's eyes got that blurred light as they accompanied her through the dance. It ended abruptly with her short skirt above her knees as she spun, whirling.

Cut pulled his drink closer to him and looked around snaky-like. Wanted to see if anybody had been watching him. . . .

Hooraw Steve brought hands as big as spades together hard. His spread followed his example, applauding fiercely. Goldy Baca advanced toward the bowing Marcia and led her to the bar. With a quick hoist, he sat her tiny figure atop it. The guitar began to strum again, faster, throbbing. And her feet in the tinselled slippers made quick, clicking noises up and down the polished surface. They deliberately spilled filled glasses. They tauntingly tipped back sombrero brims. And always they flashed away before eager, leathery hands could capture them.

CUT put down another drink without taking his eyes away from the bar. But he wasn't watching Marcia now. No. It was the huge back of Hooraw Steve hunched over the bar edge that Cut's slate eyes' never stirred from.

The music ended finally. Cut drew a silk handkerchief from his sleeve and delicately wiped his forehead. Hooraw Steve was standing up the house for Marcia. He lifted his own glass to her rouged lips, laughed wildly when she took a sip, then emptied it himself. And he turned and slammed the glass across the room so that it shattered on the wooden sidewalk just without the batwing doors. The ponies at the hitch-rail whinnied and stirred excitedly.

Cut rose. He was wan. Hooraw Steve knew some slick tricks for a trail boss. Goldy Baca studied Cut an instant with his fishy stare, winked at Alvarez. The warm, sensuous music again filled the barroom. From the booths at the other side of the hall, dance-hall girls issued. Hooraw's outfit stampeded from the bar to get themselves a girl.

The gambler stepped quickly toward his wife as she leaped down from the bar top. Aside from the Baca brothers themselves, the barkeep with the cast in his eye, and the sage Alvarez nobody knew that Cut Dolton and Marcia the dancer were man and wife. It would not have been good business.

Cut stepped around a drunken puncher who reeled off the edge of the dance floor with a laughing girl. Cut's level, slate-hued eyes never left Marcia. And with a half bow, one of his hands went out to grab her wrist.

Nobody, not even Alvarez, who had been there the day the Baca brothers argued about who was going to nail up the sign, had ever seen Cut Dolton dance before. He reached for his woman.

And so did Hooraw Steve!

THE blind man began to sing in a shrill voice, slapping the back of his instrument sharply. And Cut Dolton met the arrogant eyes of the big Hooraw hombre across the dyed blonde head of Marcia.

Dolton nodded. "I'm asking the lady for this dance."

Hooraw wiped his mouth with the back

of his hand, but did not release the girl. "The lady has just finished promisin' me."

Cut Dolton opened his lips slightly, sucked air. He didn't waste words. He looked at Marcia. And she nodded slightly, obediently. Cut started to move toward the packed floor.

Hooraw was not quitting so easily. He jerked her bare arm insistently. And Marcia tossed her blonde locks in Cut's face as she turned to the trail boss. She smiled, regretfully. But there was a half promise in that smile. And she hadn't smiled at Cut.

Hooraw laughed then, and the sound was a signal to his gun-slinging hands of the T-Z. They knew that when Hooraw laughed like that . . .

The guitar strummed harder and wilder. Dance-hall girls widened mascaraed eyes. But certain hombres sort of left their girls standing and converged on that point where Cut Dolton and Hooraw stood over the woman.

Hooraw had laughed. The brick-red face glowed. He began to rub hand palms down his dusty levis. "I know one way uh makin' a gent dance—an' dance plenty! Uh course, he dances alone—an' the lead cuts up the floor like hell. . . ."

Cut's fingers were stretched stiff—like he always stretched them just before he dealt a deck. He started to move his feet to the music. But his low voice knifed through it. "When I use lead, I don't waste it on no floor!"

The music was going faster and still hotter—like their blood. But nobody was dancing. And no drinks were being poured at the bar. The T-Z hands had gathered behind Hooraw. And there were five hombres, Goldy Baca's picked gun-aces, ready to back any play Cut might make.

Everybody in the crowded place was watching the two.

"Yeah?" said Cut.

"Yeah!" answered Hooraw.

The crowd knew Cut Dolton for a tough man—a fast man with his gun. They knew Hooraw Stevens—second to none in any kind of ruckus. They waited, silent, expectant.

Still holding Marcia by the wrist, the gambler slipped in front of her. "We might—cut for it . . ." he said, and there was something in the way he said it, in

the look in his eyes that made the cowman grin.

"We better have a coupla shots uh red-eye fust," he proposed slowly.

THERE was a disgusted guffaw from the rear. And a hand smacked a thigh. "I'll be danged if the loboos ain't purrin'!"

The tension was shattered with a laugh that traveled around the barroom. Glasses rattled and boots shifted. Goldy Baca started to play with his nugget-adorned watch-chain again. It looked like the storm had blown over.

It hadn't. The eyes of the two locked again. They had been on the verge of dropping it. But that mob wouldn't let them do it. Spectators, they wanted a fight so long as it wasn't at their own expense.

"We won't bother cuttin'," Dolton said coldly. And he lifted a hand for music.

As the first chord sounded, Hooraw put his body between the gambler and the dance-floor. And a drunken hand of the T-Z spread threw his sombrero at the ceiling.

"Ride him, Hooraw! Ride him!"

One of the Baca gun-hands answered that challenge with a hoarse whisper, plainly audible, to Cut. "Yuh taken better gents than him, Cut!"

Hooraw's eyes bulged more as he heard. Seizing the dance-hall girl's shoulder, he jerked her from the gambler's grasp. Dolton's frock coat hung open, exposing his shoulder holster. One of his pale hands started in its direction as he advanced. Hooraw swung the girl beside him, one arm imprisoning her. And she made no attempt to break away.

Maybe that was what made Cut's nostrils pinch and quiver like a nervous colt's. "Stranger, I'll—"

And he came closer.

Hooraw's long, loose arm went out straight and held the gambler off. "You'll what, fella? What?" Hooraw was getting a little eerie. His face was redder.

Cut was coldly drunk. But he didn't want to smoke it out over a silly deal like this. He was older than the trail boss. He knew men and life. He shook his graying head slowly. As if to warn.

Somebody said hoarsely: "A gambler what won't back his bets!"

Lights danced in Cut Dolton's narrowed eyes.

Impatient, Hooraw's spread began to shove forward. Wasn't no two-bit card man going to tell one of their bunch he wasn't going to dance. And the barroom crowd pressed tighter back to the little card dealer.

"Bulldog the boogery critter, Hooraw!"

Hooraw laughed and nodded. "Watch!" Swinging the dance-hall girl in front of him, he kissed her loudly. Kissed Cut Dolton's wife!

And she didn't try to draw away. It almost seemed as if she loved that brick-faced cowman.

BUT Cut pulled her away. Jerked her out of Hooraw's arms and flung her back against a table. And then he faced Hooraw, that left shoulder forward again. Hooraw's eyes followed the girl across Cut's lower shoulder. There was something funny, surprise maybe, in Hooraw Steve's look.

A shout from Hooraw's bunch, and the big trail-boss pulled himself together. His eyes left the girl reluctantly. They speared at Cut. And then Hooraw leaped back as he would from a mad bull. His gun arm streaked down.

Too late! Cut's hand was already beneath his coat. The gleaming butt of his .44 showed against his white shirt. He was ready, waiting, calling the bets.

Hooraw knew when he was whipped. The trail-boss didn't have the rep of a man-breaker for nothing. He knew his hombres. And he recognized a cornered killer in the cardman. His gun hand stopped.

And at Goldy Baca's orders, the two husky barmen grabbed the cowman. Goldy himself slid in front of Cut.

"Now, boys—"

But it was too late for that. Cut shoved the fat barroom-owner out of his path. Mouth aslant, he eyed the big cowman. And Hooraw Steve was about loco. He couldn't stand a man grabbing him. His bunch was moiling around him.

"Let him loose!" Cut ordered.

Hooraw stood freed. But still he didn't dare to make a play. It would have been suicide by any coroner's verdict. Cut had him covered. The gun-aces of the barroom watched his spread.

The cardman didn't want any killing. He had the drop on his hombre now. He gestured with the weapon. "Get out an'—"

As the play stood, Hooraw Steve was a whipped gent. Whipped before the eyes of the outfit he rodded. He nodded his red face.

"Uh-huh! I'm pullin' stakes now. But come sundown—"

"Yeah?"

"Come sundown, I'll be ridin' down that street, a-ready to shoot!"

Cut Dolton went paler. "All right . . . I'll call you!"

Hooraw jammed on his hat and tramped to the door with his bunch at his back. Cut's head shook regretfully as he watched. He didn't want to ride down to face that locoed cowman. Not from fear. But . . .

Hooraw whirled at the door and the two eyed each other silently. Then Hooraw turned and left. Cut holstered his gun and headed toward the stairway to his room upstairs. He saw Marcia, his wife, watching the Hooraw hombre mount from the open window. Cut saw the girl's lips move.

With every step, he got grayer.

THE T-Z spread had pitched its camp where the bend of Elbow Creek made a natural bed ground for the herd. Hooraw Steve sat now against the chuck-wagon wheel and rolled countless querleys. Behind him, some of the bunch parleyed about the smoldering cooking fire. Chowhead grumbled unendingly about his dutch oven.

Hooraw thought. Thought plenty. Beside him, the muddy spokes of the wheel were dyed crimson by the western sun. When that sun touched the rim of the wheel Hooraw Steve knew it would be time to fork his steeldust horse down to where the barroom stood.

He added another to the pile of cigaret stubs surrounding him and lit a fresh one. A danged fool! A loud-mouthed ranny who'd talked himself into a tight! That's what he was. A two-legged, hoorawing jackass who was going to pay for his talk with gun-language! That's what he was.

He swore softly as the match burned his fingers.

He could still see the little, tight-lipped cardman. Sort of a nice-looking gent. The kind of a hombre who'd stay with a ranny in the toughest pinch. You could see that

at a glance. Not a loud-mouthed fella. Not the kind who'd tell everybody along the trail how hot he was. But if he shook hands with you, that stuck and he played them that way until the last chip was cashed. That was the kind of a gent he'd be. Hooraw knew.

Maybe he could sort of mosey in smiling-like and talk it over. He should have talked it over before. If it hadn't been for that girl. . . .

Hooraw closed his eyes while he thought of her.

Then he opened them again. Trouble was, when a hombre got a rep for being a man-breaker, he had to live up to it. The crowd made him. If it hadn't been for that oreymob in the Golden Dollar . . .

Hooraw pinched out the cigaret, then absently lit it again. Yeah, if he and that cardman had bumped on the open trail, they'd have argued a little, passed a bottle, and made camp together. Wouldn't have been no talk about guns at all.

Hooraw knew if he voiced a word of what he thought to that group back at the fire, they'd begin to figure he had a yellow streak. They'd wonder if at last Hooraw Steve had met a better gent and knew it.

He got up slowly, stared a long moment at the segment of sun sliced by the ridge rim. Then he walked around the wagon toward the paint horse that waited, still saddled.

The little group around the fire got up with understanding glances. They too walked toward their horses. They were going to see Hooraw through this thing.

Hooraw, with a leg over the kak, turned back. Yep, they were going to back him. And though they didn't know it, they were going to force him to go through with it.

He'd fool them. He'd give the cardman his hand!

DOWNSTAIRS, the piano and guitar thumped away merrily. Cut Dolton heard them plainly through the thin, pine floor of the cubbyhole he occupied above the Baca place. Slowly and thoughtfully, he wiped his razor. In the cracked mirror, he studied his blue jowls. Clean-shaven! Then he began to draw on a clean shirt. Cut Dolton was preparing to go to his rendezvous with death like a gentleman.

With the fancy, white shirt hanging un-

buttoned, tails flapping over the sides of the chair, he sat and speculated. He knew who Hooraw Steve, boss of the T-Z outfit, was. He had seen him in the Golden Dollar once before. He had even seen Hooraw pull a gun and smoke it at a target on a bet with a gent from the Bitter Creek country.

Cut knew exactly how fast Hooraw could draw. Knew to a second how long it took Hooraw to get that Colt's out of its tied-down gun sheath on his thigh.

Cut, whose business was betting, knew one other thing. It was that when he and the Hooraw hombre looked at each other across gun sights, it was anybody's game. It was a wide-open gamble. Only God would know the winner.

The cardman went over to the paintless bureau and began to comb his graying hair. He looked out the window facing north and measured the sun's rays on the weather-beaten gilt sign of the Golden Dollar. Then he poured himself a drink. Half lifted to his lips, he halted with it. For below he could hear the voice of his wife in a song.

He waited until she had finished. Wild clapping and stomping rose in the wake of her voice. Then he emptied the glass. He proceeded to tuck in the shirt tails, studying one that had become torn. He slipped into his tight-waisted coat, took it off again as he realized he had neglected to slip on the shoulder holster. Must be getting old. . . .

Riffling a deck of cards, he sat at the window. In about half an hour . . .

GOLDY had promised to have a horse saddled for him. He thought he could half hear the tinkle of a bridle chain from the corral at the rear. Hooraw would sit big in a hull. He wondered if that brick-hued face would be pale in action.

Of course, he could play it safe by shooting down the horse, then throwing down on the Hooraw man as he scrambled out of the dust. That would be the nearest thing to a coppered bet. Still, a gent like that Hooraw breed would come up shooting. No doubt of it. Maybe it might be better to . . .

Cut sat up straight with a jerk and for an instant his dexterous fingers ceased riffling the card deck. He was thinking like a gambler, a man meeting a bet across

a green baized-topped gambling table.

A fellow like Hooraw talked big. People expected it of him. He was rodding an ornery spread. And Hooraw had brought that bunch down the famed Sagonde trail without the loss of a critter.

A good man and a tough one. Cut knew the kind. Proud of his gun-fame, yet the sort of hombre who'd never pull trigger unless it was the only way out. Young and wild. That was Hooraw.

Cut bent his head as if to look through that pine floor, at the motley bunch downstairs. If it hadn't been for them . . .

Well, he might even have crawled a little.

But his reputation as a cardman was at stake. He got up and straightened his black tie in the mirror. If he had backed down before that mob, Goldy Baca would have been forced to draw him aside as they closed the place for the night and give him a little talking to. Probably would have a new gent coming in to deal.

Cut blinked quickly, then passed a hand across his eyes. Was that really a white streak in his hair? He picked up the comb.

From below, the strident voice of his wife rose again in a song. Cut froze. He was getting pretty old. And she was young. Young and pretty and . . .

He had tried not to think of her before. He had tried not to bring her into the deal. But, after all. . . . Cut forgot about the white hair in his head thinking of how she had looked at that brick-faced cowman.

He pulled himself together. After all, he'd give her what she wanted. If that was it. . . . Well, there was no sense in spilling lead. Wouldn't do no good. And it was crazy. Hooraw Steve was the kind of a gent who'd back his bets and pay them regardless of the cost. The kind of a gent he liked! Why, if it hadn't been for that mob below . . .

"Belly-y up on the house!"

It was Goldy's booming voice bidding them line up for a free round. The way he always did as the sun set, to start things going for the night.

Cut Dolton got up stiffly. Suddenly, he felt very tired. But he knew what he was going to do. He would ride down that street with his gun palm as far from the butt as he could get it. And he would smile. And the Hooraw hombre would come the other way. Then they would shake hands

in the middle of the street. But Cut was older. He knew, unfortunately, things didn't always come off as planned in the gamble that was life.

He went down the backstairs and out to where the Spic boy had Goldy's own stallion saddled and ready for him.

THE setting sun was a mere crimson reflection on the horizon. The tin sign of the Baca brothers' Golden Dollar gleamed redly. The weed-grown, alkali street became a thing transformed in the magic alchemy of the sunset. It was a red way, slightly blurred, warm, inviting.

Hazy, dusk-blurred figures that were men lined it. In front of the dance hall, a few scantily clothed women watched.

Out of the South came a big gent, riding easy. He pulled his horse to a walk at the town's edge. Hooraw Steve!

Around the corner of the paint-peeling Golden Dollar spurred a lean, angular man. He neck-reined it hard. The horse sidled to the center of the alkali road. Then it began to walk, pawing the dust impatiently. The rider had a weary smile. Cut Dolton!

Hooraw's face was like a sunrise. He too smiled, rather grinned. He knew. The crowd didn't know. But they were going to shake hands. Cut hoped so too, but he wasn't as sure as Hooraw Steve. Cut was older than Hooraw, a lot older. Old enough to know the world won't ever let the lion lie down with the lamb.

Their horses came closer. There was less than twenty yards separating them. Still they both smiled, neither inching a hand toward his gun.

Along the sidewalks, hombres flattened back against the wall fronts. When two such as Cut and Hooraw clashed . . .

The cardman was watching Hooraw Steve. Watching him with the lynx eyes that commanded a gambling table. Saw the way his feet tightened in the stirrups as they neared. Saw that both hands were wrapped around the saddle horn. Saw the grin and the hopeful eyes set in the brick-red face.

Hooraw too, was measuring his man. He couldn't read a thing in the slaty eyes of the gambler. He noted, with a twinge of envy, the stark, clean shirt and the perfectly knotted black tie. He saw the wasp waist. And the glossy boots, toeing the

stirrups as no man would who rode often. And against the saddle flaps, he saw Cut's white hands.

They were going to shake . . .

The shrill, cutting, mocking laughter of a woman from in front of the Golden Dollar cut the dusk-dyed air. A mocking, taunting laugh! Perhaps she saw, realized they weren't going to gun it out if they could help it. Her laugh rang in their ears. Each wondered at whom the laugh was directed.

Hooraw took his gun hand off the saddle horn. Cut saw. His black coat bent tightly at the elbows, creasing, as his arms lifted. Who was being laughed at?

The horses neared, unknowing. Hooraw's eyes shifted as he thought of those hombres of his spread watching from the rear.

TEN yards apart. Hesitantly, reluctantly, the gun hand of each started for action. Inches from butts, they froze. neither wanted . . .

And that laugh rent the fast-falling night again.

Hooraw Steve's Colt's flashed up. Cut hadn't started, but he got that .44 out and up. The laugh, or its echoes, still rattled. Gun shots chopped it off. And Alvarez, in the gutter, threw away his marijuannaed cigarette.

Flames spiked over horse ears. Hooraw shot first. Cut shot straighter. Hooraw slid from the saddle. But he landed on one leg, holding himself erect with hand locked to the saddle horn. Cut was a cardman, a gambler, and a square one.

He, too, dropped from the horse. They shot again. It was like a play, somehow unreal in the strange light, both men crumbling. Hooraw hit his knees. Cut went on all fours, but his dealing hand came out of the dust quick. It was as if he hated to get that hand dirty.

They shot again. Both men took lead a second time. Cut spat blood. Hooraw's booming laugh cackled thinly.

Cut's gun was leveling slowly, deliberately, with the calmness of certainty. And Hooraw shot twice quickly. Then his gun, hand still locked around it, floundered in

the dust. Cut's weapon spiked the blackness, but wild. Hooraw had hit him bad.

But he still had one shot left. He sat down in the road. He smiled—like when he was calling a bluff.

From the sidewalk, high heels tapped. Marcia, his wife stood over him. Cut laughed noiselessly and made a regretful gesture as blood bubbled on his lips.

"Yeah, he's got me, honey. I'm—I'm cashin' the last chip. But . . ."

And his eyes were steady, sharp, hard things behind the sights of his .44.

" . . . but I'm takin' him tuh hell with —"

Cut Dolton stopped talking. Three-four yards, maybe less, separated him from the badly wounded, shotless cowman. And Cut Dolton looked into his wife's eyes. He saw a lot. Because she wasn't looking at him. He saw what he had seen there for himself once—as she stared as if at something forever lost—at Hooraw Steve.

Cut pushed gray hair out of his eyes. "Funny how a coppered bet slips . . . how yuh win the *dinero* an' lose it in the end—allus—jus—an old gamblin' rule." He looked again at her. "I allus give yuh what yuh want, honey . . ."

And he leveled his gun again. There was a strangled cry from the woman. Cut said: "He'll live if I don't hit him this time . . . An' I don't miss 'cept when I want tuh throw the bet . . . when . . ."

Cut shot. He smiled in the reflection of the vivid orange streak needling the night.

Was it Goldy Baca who used to say, "Give Cut an iron an' watch him pop a pea inside uh six feet. Drunk or sober."

It was just about six feet between them when Cut fired that last shot. And—he missed!

"A good dealer can—c-c-all his shots—anytime. I never miss—wh-what I'm shootin' at."

He sort of smiled toward the broken pane in the feed store window where his bullet had gone. Then he slipped down into the dust, dead before he hit it. It was good that way. Cut would have worried about getting his shirt cuffs dirty.

He was dead. He had missed. Cut Dolton was a good loser. That's another gambling rule.



THE DEVIL'S RANSOM

By ALBERT RICHARD WETJEN

Larsen of Singapore might be backed by German gunboats. He might be partnered by the Devil himself. But Heaven help once he tried to scuttle Stinger Seave and his four merry Princes of Piracy!

ON the broad veranda of a large, white-painted bungalow, resting on a hillside back of Apia in the Samoan Islands, four men sat around a

wicker table and talked about a fifth. There were glasses on the table, filled but untouched. An anxious houseboy hovered nearby, aware of the gravity of the four

white men and wondering at it. Over the veranda rail the level blue waters of Apia harbor could be seen, dotted with craft; schooners, brigs, full-riggers, luggers, barks and native canoes, for Apia at that time was the greatest port of the South Pacific.

Take a chart of that great ocean. Draw a line roughly from Shanghai to Mazatlan, from the coast of China to the coast of Mexico. Drop south some forty-five hundred miles and draw another line from Punta Arenas in the Straits of Magellan to Hobart in Tasmania. Complete the rough square now and you have enclosed an area of sea dotted with islands both great and small, containing vast areas of water unknown even today and thronged with savage tribes, saturated with fevers, swept by typhoons and imbued with calms such as you get only in the tropics.

Within this vast territory five governments held sway. There were frigates, sloops-of-war, cutters and armed yachts to uphold the Administrations. There were even a few of the more modern gunboats, although steam was then young. In palatial residences here and there sat governors who were supposed to give the law, and hold the high, the middle and the low justice. Their word carried weight, and was listened to with gravity—right from their desks to as far as the fences that hedged in their compounds and gardens. Beyond that no one paid any attention. And although they held no titles, were recognized by no governments, the four men who sat around that table in Apia were the real rulers of the South and of the Islands.

It was a rule that everyone except the Administration and a throng of the Pacific scum acknowledged, and there were times when both of these even bent in submission, just as in the early days of the American West, a handful of men ruled a wild, vast territory and made their own law.

THESE uncrowned lords of the Islands had not won their ways by sitting round tables and drinking. They were men of action, sailors of necessity, hard-living, hard-shooting adventurers. And it was by virtue of the fact they were able to shoot straighter, work harder, sail better and endure more than all others that they were famous. They made history in their day.

There was Stinger Seave at the table, little, frail, icy-eyed and chewing his ragged sandy mustache. There was Typhoon Bradley, magnificently built, gray-eyed, calm, the strongest man of his time. There was Big Bill Gunther, almost as tall as Bradley and much broader, black bearded and jovial. Lastly there was Jack Barrett, Captain Hi-Jack as they called him, six feet six of lean height, quiet but crisp. They were all in the tropical whites that were customary. They all wore guns buckled about them, except Seave who affected a shoulder bolster, not because they were particularly needed in Apia, but because it was their custom never to be unarmed. There were too many men who would have given much gold to have met any one of them unarmed. The South was wild and the men who lived long were those who never slept, who kept always as alert as jungle animals, who struck swift as a snake when striking was needed, who kept their word, stood by their friends and had only a gun-muzzle for their foes. That was the South in the old time! . . .

DOWN in Apia itself in Charley Roberts' saloon, men sat and drank and talked of but one thing.

There were the captains and mates of the shipping, planters and traders in for a spree, a few government officials, the officers from a British man-o'-war. It was getting late in the afternoon and normally most of these men would have been taking a siesta because of the heat. But an abnormal thing was taking place, so they sat around and drank and wondered.

"It's never happened before," stated the stocky master of a brig just down from the Marshalls. "They're a bunch of lone wolves and they prefer to play a lone hand."

"That's right," agreed the mate of a Solomon Island "blackbirder." "They've never got together before, at least not all at once."

Charley Roberts leaned his fat arms on the bar and grunted, chewing his toothpick.

"It was Bradley sent for 'em," he said. "And he's been waiting here three weeks for 'em to arrive. Barrett was down in the Paumotus tied up with the pearling but he dropped everything and came. Gunther was sick in bed at Suva but he had himself

carried down to Markham's bark that was still leaving for here. Seave was in some sort of a jam in Sydney over the shooting of some Kanakas in Montague Bay last year, but he skipped his bail and came. I do hear he was fired on as he got out of the harbor."

"**T**HEN why don't they arrest him here?" inquired the green young supercargo of a German full-rigger just out from Hamburg. Everyone who heard him laughed and the secretary to the British consul, who was present, stroked his mustache and leaned forward.

"This isn't Sydney," he commented. "If you want to make a lot of money, young 'un, you go up and arrest him here in Apia. He's worth five thousand pounds, dead or alive."

"Good Lord!" said the supercargo. "Then why . . . he's on British territory. There's a warship in the harbor. . . . I don't see. . . ."

"Give him another year in the South and he'll see," laughed a brown-mustached trader, jerking a thick thumb at the supercargo.

"Well, it's hard to explain," remarked the secretary to the consul, taking pity on the youth, "but I'll try. Everyone, or most everyone, approves of Seave. He's a good man for this time and place. He's done more to bring the Islands in line than anyone else, except perhaps Bradley. The officers on that warship wouldn't officially see him unless a specific order came from Sydney, and that never will. The governor has Seave to dinner when he's there."

"Then why was he under arrest for shooting those Kanakas?" demanded the puzzled supercargo. He was fresh from civilized countries and none of this made sense to him.

"He went to Sydney of his own accord," patiently explained the secretary. "Some fool official up north had sworn out a warrant for him, and Seave wanted to have the thing cleared up. He doesn't pay attention to warrants if he considers they're justified. When he knows he's done something strictly illegal he expects warrants. But when he feels he's right he goes up and has it out with the Governor and the courts."

"It's really a joke," commented Charley

Roberts, still chewing his toothpick. "If he ever did get to trial there wouldn't be a man on the jury who hadn't been with him on some crazy deal. Not a chance for conviction."

"By the way," asked the brown-mustached trader, "what happened to that official who swore out the warrant?"

THE consul's secretary blinked and looked blank.

"I—er—don't know officially."

"Unofficially then?"

"I—er—believe he had an accident. Tried to draw a gun."

"Yeah," drawled Charley Roberts, "they buried him at sea."

"If you really want to make your fortune," said the secretary smiling at the pop-eyed supercargo, "just go up and arrest all four of those men. I'll have you sworn in if you like so it's legal. There's five thousand quid reward for Seave, two thousand for Barrett, fifteen hundred for Gunther and four thousand for Bradley. All payable in gold upon production of said gentlemen before a magistrate. The crimes range from murder, violation of international rights, seal poaching, raiding pearl preserves, piracy, illegal working of Kanakas and so on down to failing to get proper ship papers before leaving port."

"I'll lend you my gun," suggested the trader, getting up as if to unbuckle it. Everyone laughed.

"Don't let 'em kid you, chum," drawled Charley Roberts. "There's no man, no ten men in these parts who could arrest any one of that bunch. 'Less you want to get full of lead you stay here . . . though I rather think they'd just spank you and send you home. They're the straightest, whitest fellers in the Islands."

"And the best men with guns," someone added. The supercargo wiped his forehead and called for another drink.

"Well, I can understand that now," he said feebly. "But why all the excitement just because they've met here today?"

There was a dead silence at that for a moment, a distinct air of gravity coming to those present. But at last Charley Roberts took out his toothpick and said one word, "Cassidy!"

They all nodded.

"No doubt of it," the trader agreed, nod-

ding sagely and pulling at his mustache.

"Cassidy's one of our Island millionaires," Charley Roberts explained. "Owns more ships and plantations than anyone else. Pioneer. Here before any of us. Getting old now but still full of . . . well . . . hell, I suppose you'd call it. That bunch gamming up there on the hill are his best friends and it looks to me like something's going to happen."

"Something will happen," agreed the trader. "And someone's going to get planted. Larsen and Gentleman Harry have bit off too much this time."

Charley Roberts shrugged.

"Well, you've got to admit they're lucky. They've bucked all of that bunch up there one time or another and got away alive anyway."

"There's always a last time . . . a time too many," someone observed.

The young supercargo wiped his forehead again and got to his feet.

"I think I'll go on board. This is all too much for me. I thought such times died out with the pirates."

"The place for you is home," said Charley Roberts, and they all laughed again. Be it said in passing that the supercargo, after seeing two men shot in Suva and one knifed in Brisbane did go home. He did not like the Islands at all.

II

TYPHOON BRADLEY picked up his untouched glass, emptied it at a gulp and set it down.

"Well," he said grimly, "I'm glad you fellers could make it."

"It's about Cassidy, I understand?" put in Seave in his gentle and deceptive voice.

"I heard something about his dropping out of sight," added Barrett picking up his drink.

Gunther hitched at his cartridge belt and grunted.

"What's the old fool been up to now?"

Bradley flicked a black speck from his whites and stared at them, his eyes slowly traveling from face to face.

"I knew I could rely on you fellers," he said at last. "Yes, it's about Cassidy. He's been damned good to everyone of us. Damned white. He's sort of the grand old man of the Islands." They all nodded.

"So it's up to us, as his friends," said Bradley soberly. He called to the houseboy to fill the glasses. "Let me give you the story as I know it." He waited until the houseboy had retired.

"About a year ago I made an appointment in Sydney to meet Cassidy in Macassar, which I later did, and we went up into the Tomorie Gulf together on a matter dealing with the disappearance of Cassidy's *Warwari*, and out of which we got a fat haul of pearls. I was laid up after that affair in the mission hospital at Brindai. I'd been shot up pretty bad shooting it out with Gentleman Harry, Clint Murphy and some others. You may have heard."

"Howder of the *Laghorn* told me the yarn on Ponape two months ago," said Gunther. The rest merely nodded, their eyes fastened on Bradley's calm, strong face.

"Well, anyway," Bradley went on, "I was pretty sick for a while and Cassidy went on round to Port Moresby on some business and sent me a letter about a month later, asking me to join him as he had something first class on. He had, too, and when I joined him he was full of it."

"You know his interests are pretty large and scattered all the way from Shanghai to the Kermadecs, and it's always been his custom to employ two or three scouts to run around and see what's going on. Well, one of these men, named Caradoc, it seems, stumbles on an island, up near Woodlark, to be exact. Seems he had to run into shelter to get out of a blow and had to careen ship, so he spent his spare time exploring the place. It's on the charts, I understand, and has never been surveyed."

"Fairly large place, Cassidy said, about six miles by four. Got a lot of good sandalwood on it, some guano on the south end and so forth. But the main point is this Caradoc discovered gold. I saw some samples. Friable quartz literally rotten with the stuff, and Caradoc claimed the vein was big."

"WELL, he reported to Cassidy and Cassidy, of course, is all excited over it. It isn't that he needs any more money, but he likes the game you know. So he suggests I go with him and help out. As it happened I couldn't. I hadn't been

able to attend to my own business for some time, and I had to go to Singapore. And then, the way Cassidy told the yarn, the thing looked like a cinch and I thought he could handle it alone. So I wished him luck and sailed with Caffey on the *Frigate Bird*. Cassidy, I heard later, left soon after I did with his *Sandow* and a mess of mining gear. Took Chang, the pearl buyer, with him because Chang knows mining as well as pearls, and is a damned good man to have with you."

"Chang should have been a white man," said Barrett nodding. That was the highest compliment he could pay the Chinaman. Bradley grunted and finished his drink. Seave lighted one of his powerful cheroots and seemed to go to sleep.

"Let me finish," said Bradley lighting a cheroot himself. "I heard nothing for some time, until two months ago in fact, I was all tied up in a lawsuit with old Hoffman over my salvage claim against his *Bluebird*, and then I was trying to get organized to make a raid on a ruby mine in Borneo. Anyway, one day Kessell of the *Water Lily* blows into port. He's just come from Samarai and I run across him in Fong's joint . . . down on the point . . . you know."

"Women, liquor and opium," observed Gunther, grinning and pouring himself another drink. "I didn't think it of you, Typhoon."

"Shut up!" Bradley snapped. "I was there to haul my mate away. He'd been on a four-day bat. . . Well, anyway, as soon as Kessell sees me he calls me over and we shake hands. I didn't want to stay, but I owe Kessell a good turn or two so I sat down and bought him a drink. He was well organized already and we talked of this and that for a spell. Then all of a sudden Kessell slaps his leg and swears. 'By God!' he tells me. 'I knew there was something on my mind. I've just come from Samarai and you ought to run over pronto.' 'What in hell do I want to go to Samarai for?' I asked him. 'I'm tied up here for another six months by the looks of things.' 'I thought you and Cassidy were good friends,' he said, and, of course, that made me sit up, especially since I hadn't heard from Cassidy for so long. 'What's wrong now?' I asked him. 'Well, there's a Kanaka in the hospital at Samarai. Roberts

brought him in from sea, found him drifting in a canoe. Keeps asking for you they tell me.' 'Got any idea who the man is?' I wanted to know. 'Why yes,' said Kessell. 'Name's Noama, Marshall Islander, so I heard.' . . . I'm giving you fellers the thing the way it came to me, savvy?

"TO cut a long story short, I got the hunch something was wrong. Noama was the name of Cassidy's bosun on the *Sandow*. I was all tangled up in Singapore but I settled with Hoffman for about a fourth of what I should have got, appointed Bill Tremlett as my agent, and pulled out for Samarai. When I got there I found Noama in a bad way. Roberts had found him drifting about in a shot-riddled canoe west of Ginetu Island, half dead with thirst, and badly wounded.

"They'd had to amputate his left leg at Samarai, and they told me a bullet had about wrecked him internally. The miracle was he'd lasted as long as he had, but you know how those Kanakas can hang on when they've got something on their mind they want to get rid of.

"He didn't trust anyone apparently. I guess Cassidy had told him not to. The thing was too big. Anyway, as soon as Noama saw me . . . he knew me . . . he sat right up in bed, took a little rawhide bag from round his neck where he had it hung by a string, and gave it to me. Then he made me send the orderly out of the room and chattered away in the dialect. I won't give you what he said exactly, because it was chopped up. But I'll tell you the story as I've figured it out."

Bradley paused, poured another drink and slowly sipped it. Seave opened his hard blue eyes and frowned.

"Did you have to drag us all away from our business because of this? You were nearest. Why didn't you go to Cassidy right away if he needed help."

"That's right," yawned Barrett, ruffling his hair. "You must be getting old, Typhoon."

"Wait a bit, wait a bit," Bradley warned them. "I know when a thing's too big for me."

"Go on," said Gunther. "Get to the point."

"All right then," said Bradley bluntly. "Here's the situation in a nutshell. Cas-

sidy and Chang left for this island of gold. Caradoc, the man who found the place, and who was Cassidy's scout, must have thought things over and figured he was a fool for giving away information just for wages and a bonus. He goes to Black Dutch, who happens to be in Port Moresby at the time, and he spills the beans.

"Dutch sees it's a good thing. But he also knows that if he jumps Cassidy he's in bad with all of us. So he runs up to Singapore . . . right while I'm there too . . . under my nose so to speak, and he gets hold of Gentleman Harry and Larsen. All of them get their heads together and figure out one of the cleverest plans I've ever heard of . . . if I'm figuring right from what Noama told me."

TYPHOON BRADLEY looked at each of the three listeners.

"These three blackguards, wanting to be on the safe side, make a bargain with the German governor of Northern New Guinea. They know damned well that Cassidy's bound to raise the British flag and take lawful possession of an unclaimed and unnamed island, later getting a permanent and legal concession on it, of course. So they figure on the German governor, and the German governor agrees it's a good idea to jump the island for Germany and let Dutch and the rest work the gold and sandalwood on a fifty-fifty basis.

"I suppose the governor knew the island wouldn't be recorded yet, so that officially, the British government wouldn't know anything about it, and likely enough wouldn't even know of it unofficially. Cassidy would stick with his mining, of course. He wouldn't trot on back to Samarai or Port Moresby just to register his title and report. He'd wait until he was through, figuring himself that no one was aware what he was up to except Caradoc and me, and trusting both of us.

"So here's how it looks. Dutch, Larsen, Gentleman Harry and Caradoc jump Cassidy and Chang and take possession in the name of Germany. The Germans send an armed cutter to sit in the one good harbor the island has . . . according to Noama . . . and Cassidy and Chang are held prisoners on the grounds of violating foreign territory, and working mineral there without permission. They daren't kill them, of

course, since the Germans are in charge. That'd cause complications with the British. But they've got 'em cinched. No court in the world would doubt the word of a German governor and half a dozen other men to the effect the island was newly acquired German property before Cassidy landed. Or rather, the courts damned well would doubt it, but not enough to render a just decision. The thing isn't worth a war, if you get me. With a German armed cutter sitting in the island's harbor, the British governor of New Guinea isn't going to rush over to argue the matter. Black Dutch and the rest have got Cassidy on the hip, and they know it. When they've worked out all the gold, and stripped the place completely, they'll send Cassidy and Chang to a German court and either soak them a heavy fine or put them to work with the slave gangs. . . . So there you have it!"

Bradley finished abruptly and flung his cheroot away.

III

THERE was a long silence. A big fly droned along the veranda and back again. No one moved. The houseboy padded silently to the table and refilled the glasses, and padded as silently away again. And then Stinger Seave sat up with a jerk.

"It's clever, damned clever!" he admitted crisply.

Gunther yawned again.

"First time I ever heard of an island being looted. That reef of gold must be rich."

Jack Barrett got up from his chair and stretched himself.

"When do we start?" he said quietly.

Bradley lighted another cheroot and allowed a thin smile to cross his lips.

"I guess you all savvy now why I called you in?"

"I apologize," snapped Seave. "I apologize, Typhoon. One man can't fight a nation."

"That's what it amounts to," Bradley agreed. "The German governor would call on warships if he had to, and if that gold vein is as good as it ought to be from the samples."

"Cassidy and Chang have been prisoners then for months," said Gunther slowly. "That's damned bad . . . for someone. I

don't like the idea of my friends being prisoners."

"One thing's certain," put in Barrett, hitching up his cartridge belt. "Cassidy's not going to work with any German slave gang in the jungle on a frame-up." Seave did not reply to that but his eyes grew cold as ice and he slowly rubbed his throat with his right hand.

"We could take a dozen shiploads of volunteers up north if we wanted to," Bradley observed. "But I thought it was a job for us alone. If we raided in force it'd embarrass the British government, and we'd be out of luck ourselves if we were ever caught in German waters."

"Right!" said Gunther. "It's a job for us alone . . . done quietly."

Bradley nodded and then he took from his pocket a small rawhide pouch.

"This is what Noama gave me in Samarai," he explained. "He tells me that most of Cassidy's men were killed in Dutch's raid. Cassidy's ship, the *Sandow*, was confiscated and sent north to Konstantinshafen. They kept Cassidy and Chang and three of their Kanakas, including Noama, on the armed cutter at the island, afraid if they sent them north too soon they might get in touch with friends and raise a stink. Cassidy told Noama to get away if he could . . . that Kanaka's damned clever . . . grab a canoe and try for Woodlark Island fifty miles to the south. Noama made it, after waiting a month or so, but they spotted him and opened fire, nearly killing him. A fog came up and he lost them in that. Roberts picked him up after he'd been afloat nearly two weeks."

"**W**HAT'S that?" Gunther demanded as Bradley opened the rawhide pouch and drew from it a ragged-edged square of duck. It was ominously stained in one corner and had evidently been torn from a jacket.

"That's what Cassidy sent," said Bradley simply. "He told Noama to give it only to me. Look!"

He spread the scrap of duck on the table and smoothed it out. And they all bent over and read, printed in shaky letters:

Typhoon. Get the boys and come. Held by Black Dutch gang under German flag. Frame-up. You remember island and Caradoc. Extreme caution. Cutter here. Noama knows. Cassidy.

Gunther drew his breath in between his teeth.

"The damned swine!" he rapped, his normally lazy disposition gone. Barrett said nothing but rubbed the palm of his hand over his gun butt. Seave's hard eyes glittered. Bradley folded up the message and put it away.

"I take it we're all agreed then," he said calmly. "If we lose, it'll be a firing squad or a life sentence with the slave gangs. We're butting into something international, and better men than us have been smashed between two empires."

"Better men, hell!" Gunther growled. "I cleaned up on a Russian cruiser once in the Behring and I guess I can take on a couple empires long as I get enough to eat and drink."

Bradley nodded.

"It's got to be secret, of course. That's understood. And there's no sense the four of us getting into any arguments about it. We ought to take a vote about who's to command."

"I take no vote," said Seave crisply. "It's your game, Bradley. I'll serve under you."

"No argument there," drawled Barrett. "This is no time for any of us to get touchy about taking orders. It's a play that's got to have one head to run it."

Gunther only nodded. And the agreement of those three famous men to serve under a fourth was genuinely a revelation, when it is remembered that each of them were notoriously lone wolves. That each of them was a great captain and adventurer in his own right; that each boasted that they served no man.

But after all, it was Cassidy who was at stake, white-headed old Cassidy whom they all loved and respected. Seave stood up, his five feet two inches of height quite erect.

"Gunther. You've got the biggest craft. We'll commandeer it."

"Don't need t' commandeer nothing," Gunther grunted. "I donate her."

"**A**LL the expenses are on me," said Bradley, and there was an immediate chorus.

"The hell they are! This party ain't exclusive!"

"We'll split her four ways," suggested Barrett, and that settled that. Bradley

coughed and brushed what seemed a little mist from his eyes.

"I'm damned if I ever saw three such damned fools as ready to spend money to go and get shot to death or work in a slave gang!"

"Make it four fools!" said Seave gently.

"It's a good thing to know . . . that you've got friends who'll stand by you," said Barrett crisply. They looked at each other and then they shook hands. It was all settled. Bradley tightened his belt and his voice tightened with it. He was Captain Bradley now and he had three mates. His orders rapped out.

"Stinger, you go see Bannister and arrange for supplies for six months! Get dynamite! Have everything that will be needed on board Gunther's *Sea King* before sundown, if you have to blow the town apart!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" Seave grunted.

"Gunther! You'll have the *Sea King* ready to sail on tonight's tide or I'll want to know the reason! Get on board and make out a list of things needed. You'd better start now. Send the list to Seave at Bannister's!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Barrett! Find out how many men Gunther has in his crew and replace them. This is a white man's affair. Only those close-mouthed. Howard's in port isn't he? And Carstairs? Pick out some others. Tell them to report to me here and I'll arrange to have their business taken care of. Their mates can run their ships until we get back . . . if we do!" Typhoon said grimly.

"Aye, aye, sir," snapped Barrett grimly. "Shall I tell them at the same time what it's about?"

"Tell them Cassidy's in trouble and we're asking them a favor. God knows they owe us enough. We'll tell them the rest when we're at sea. Remember, we said with the night tide. . . . Got it? Then get out!"

And incredible as it seems those three men who took orders from no man obediently turned and hurried down toward Apia. Bradley laughed, grimly. In his heart he felt rather sorry for Germany, or rather for the Governor who was using her for his own gain and the gain of three of the worst and most notorious blackguards in the Islands!

IV

BLACK DUTCH, so-called because of his swarthy skin and the matted hair on his chest and arms, leaned idly against the bulkhead and held his glass toward the light to admire the sparkling bubbles of the champagne it contained.

"Here's luck!" he said harshly. "By God, we've certainly got it!"

He was a burly man, short but powerfully built, and with a reputation as dark as his name. The four other men in the saloon lifted their glasses and drank with him.

"This is going to be my last clean-up," drawled Gentleman Harry in his modulated voice. He sat sprawled in a long cane chair, immaculate in whites as usual, and with a smile on his scarred face, the face Typhoon Bradley had once changed from a handsome cameo with one blow of his fist. Larsen of Singapore, lean, grim and dark-eyed rested his elbows on the mahogany table and laughed, eying his champagne.

"I'm going to buy a yacht," he said. "A real yacht. Bark rigged and powered. I'll fill her with champagne and girls and just cruise about."

Caradoc laughed nervously. He was never quite able to get over the fear of what he had done, betrayed his employer Cassidy into the hands of these men. He was handsome in a weak way, sensitive, rather tall.

"I'll take Paris," he said. "Paris, women and liquor."

Lieutenant Hoffman, commander of the armed yacht *Wilhelmina*, in the finely decorated saloon of which they all sat, laughed and twirled his silky blond mustache. He was short, somewhat pudgy, and he had little pig eyes and coarse lips.

"Assuredly, my friends, we shall have all we need. For me Berlin and a wife . . . to manage my house . . . ladies on the side, of course. Perhaps I shall marry a Duchess. The Governor talks of St. Petersburg. But whatever it is, we shall all have it. Himmel! I have never heard of such a rich gold vein."

"It's the richest I've seen," drawled Larsen. "We won't need to bother about the sandalwood. We'll clean-up a quarter of a million apiece without it, even after the

Governor gets his whack." He grinned.

"It was all so easy too," smiled the lieutenant. "Nothing to do but enjoy ourselves while the ingots pile up in the cutter's strong room. Our dear friend Cassidy obliges us by providing the machinery, even to a smelter of sufficient size. And we find on the island a village of three hundred natives so eager to work for us."

THEY all laughed at that. The natives of that village, the men, the women and all the children able to work, had been laboring under overseers' whips for months now, learning the benefits of German rule.

"So everyone is happy," continued the lieutenant. "Your friend Cassidy and the yellow man will certainly spend ten years at labor when the courts are done. The Fatherland gains a new island and a fine big ship. And we, all of us, become rich."

Larsen drained his glass and set it down.

"It's been so damned soft it gives me th' jumps!" he declared. "That damned Kanaka Noama getting away!"

"The guard whom he got by received fifty lashes," the Lieutenant pointed out complacently. "He will be very cautious in the future. And besides what if the man did get away?"

"He's not worried about Noama getting the British stirred up," put in Gentleman Harry, his smile vanishing. "I know. It's Cassidy's friends. Seave, Bradley and the rest."

"Pah! I spit on them. We in the north have heard of them but no one dares attack a German possession."

"You don't know this bunch like we do," drawled Larsen. "That's why I'm advising you to keep your guards on the jump. You ought to have sentries posted night and day."

The Lieutenant shrugged.

"How you talk. One cannot make discipline too strict in these parts of the world. No one dare attack us. Himmel! I have a crew of twenty men, half of them white and recruited from the Imperial navy."

"I hope you're right," said Black Dutch moodily. "I know I'll be damned glad to get the thing done with and finished, so we can get away."

The Lieutenant shrugged again.

"We have the heart of the gold ripped out and smelted down. In another week

we will have done and you may go. For myself I shall remain to see that the less valuable parts of the vein are fully worked."

"That's right. Another week and we'll be gone," agreed Caradoc. "We've got enough now for that matter."

The lieutenant grew peevish.

"Of what are you nervous? Of these strange friends scattered all over the Islands? If Noama did get away . . . and I think he was shot before the fog hid him . . . what of it? He is only a Kanaka. How can he talk much? Who will believe him? It would take him a long time to find this Cassidy's friends and even then they would not dare attack us."

BLACK DUTCH heaved away from the bulkhead and laughed.

"That's about right," he said with an oath. "We're like a bunch of damned kids. It's the damned heat and monotony of laying around here for months. Let's have some more champagne!"

"Agreed!" cried the lieutenant clapping his hands and reaching for a bell that stood on the table. An orderly appeared, straightened and saluted. "Champagne, Karl. And drive the girls in!"

The man saluted again and departed. When he returned he was roughly ushering before him seven or eight young native women, all but nude and obviously frightened. Each day the lieutenant went ashore to inspect the progress of the mining, and when that was done he picked out fresh girls from the village for the evening's entertainment, tore them forcibly from their huts, sometimes from their husbands.

"There you are!" cried the lieutenant delighted. "Do not say I am not a fine host. Help yourself . . . but the tall one with the almond eyes is mine!"

Gentleman Harry caught a girl's wrist and forced her on his knee, holding a champagne glass to her lips. And so the nightly orgy began while ashore the red glare of the small smelter lighted the starry sky and in a fenced compound the impressed native workers ate their coarse supper, groaning beneath the eyes of the German overseers and the muzzles of a half dozen guards. From the beach a small wharf had been built, running out into water of a depth where the cutter could lay alongside. At

the shoreward end of the wharf there rose a flag-staff from which, by day, the Imperial German eagle floated to make all legal. It was, as Seave had said back in Apia, very cleverly done.

In the small cabin in the cutter's after house that served as a prison, Cassidy gripped the bars that covered a small opening in the door and cursed beneath his breath. He had to use his left hand because his right shoulder was still suffering from the effects of a bullet wound, obtained when Black Dutch and the rest had made their unexpected raid months before, catching Chang and himself utterly unprepared.

"The swine are at it again!" Cassidy rasped. "Hear them, Chang?"

THE slender Chinaman came and stood beside him, almost naked for his clothes had been ripped in the struggle they had had with their jailers when Noama had gotten away, a well-planned thing, that involved the rushing of the guard and the orderly when they brought the evening meal.

"Yes, I hear them," said Chang simply in his clipped English. "It would seem they have possessed every woman in the village by this time."

"Guess they've started in over again," rasped Cassidy. A groan from the darkness behind him halted him and he dropped to his knees to lift the head of a sick Kanaka, the only one now remaining of his crew. There had been two when Noama had left but one had since died.

"The poor devil's got fever bad," Cassidy grated, "and they won't even give us medicine." He arranged his jacket which served for a pillow beneath the native's head, moistened his lips with some lukewarm water and then joined Chang again. The Chinaman shrugged, impassive as always.

"I am afraid we shall spend many years in a jungle camp," he said at last. "I have no hope now."

"I guess you're right," said Cassidy moodily, and his voice was haggard. He had always bellowed in the old days but when a man has been penned up in a cabin six by eight for some time he is not apt to be in a bellowing condition. "I guess you're right," Cassidy repeated. "Noama must

have got it. Or else died of thirst. If he'd gotten away someone would have had a crack to get us."

Chang shrugged once more.

"Bradley, of course, will come when he discovers you are missing for so long, but he will not bother until a year has passed. He knows it is your habit to stay with a task until it is done."

"If Noama had got through the whole gang would have been here by now," Cassidy muttered. "If Bradley comes poking up alone to see what's become of me they'll just throw him in with us. . . . Damn it!" he burst out. "I've got twenty ships, fourteen trading posts and plantations. I could cash in for three million if I wanted to. I've got friends who'd go to hell for me and here I am . . . here we are . . . cooped up in this damned hole and we can't do a thing about it!"

"I THINK," said Chang thoughtfully, "that once Larsen, Black Dutch and Gentleman Harry are gone we *can* do something about it . . . but it might cost a lot of money."

"Hell," said Cassidy wearily. "I wanted to offer them a hundred thousand apiece to let us go and you wouldn't let me."

"Of course not," agreed Chang. "That was folly. They would never agree to let us go, not for a million. They would not dare. They know that as soon as we are free there would be a swift repayment. And if they thought this Lieutenant Hoffman was going to accept the ransom . . . supposing you had made the offer . . . then the Lieutenant would have discovered us all dead in this cabin one fine morning. Mysteriously dead, you see? As it is they plan for us to spend years as prisoners."

"I still think Larsen and the others are hogs enough to jump at a hundred thousand each!" snapped Cassidy, his anger rapidly mounting.

"Ah, yes," Chang soothed him, "if it were not for the gold. But they are rich men already. Listen to me, my friend. When they have gone we will ask to see Lieutenant Hoffman and he will listen. We will offer him one hundred thousand, two hundred if necessary, to set us free in a whaleboat with food and water, oars and a sail, and nothing more.

"We will offer to sign our notes for one

half the amount which he can send a trusted man to Port Moresby to collect from our agents. The other half we will pay at Moresby when we reach there. It is a fortune for the Lieutenant, for it is not likely the Governor will give him other than a small share of this gold here. Anyway, it is worth trying, but not now. Not until Larsen and Black Dutch and the rest have gone. They are more afraid of us than they are in need of money now. You see?" he asked.

"Maybe you're right," said Cassidy at last, after a moody silence. "But I'll swear, if I live long enough, I'll get every damned one of them for this."

Chang nodded and smiled a little.

"I do not even worry whether I go free or not, as far as vengeance is concerned. I have a cousin in Singapore and a brother in Canton. They will learn and discover some day, some time. And then judgment will be done in the way of the East. We Chinese do not like to see any one of our family lose face."

Cassidy chewed on his ragged mustache and began to pace up and down. It infuriated him to hear the noise of revelry from the ornate saloon, to know that at last he, the old pioneer, the old bear, was trapped, at the mercy of his foes. It had never happened before since the days of his green youth. It would never happen again. Not if he got out of this tight.

"I'd give very cent I possess to get that damned Caradoc between my hands!" he swore. "By God, I picked him off the streets of Brisbane, thought I'd made a man out of him, and trusted him!"

Chang sat on the deck of the cabin, folded his arms and stared blankly into the darkness, resigned and patient. His time would come, and if not his time, then the time of his cousin and his brother. Near him the fever-sick Kanaka tossed and groaned. Midships the laughter and madness went on. And judgment came up from the south with the wind.

V

"SEAVE!"

"Sir?"

"Get ready the port boat. Swing it out ready for lowering, but hold her with the gripes."

"Aye, aye, sir!" Seave snapped back.

"Masthead there! Gunther!"

"Sir?"

"How are the lights bearing?"

"Port bow, sir. We'll be abeam soon."

"What do you make of it?"

"Small cove or harbor!"

"Right! You can come down! . . . Barrett!"

"Sir?"

"Douse all our lights! No smoking on deck. Tell Harvey, Wells, Jones and Carstairs to stand by armed. Winchester and Colts!"

Bradley crossed the poop and focused his glasses. Presently he picked up little pin pricks of light low down against the dark loom of an island, the lights Gunther had located from the masthead. The *Sea King* was running free before a crisp wind, heeled a little, and the water swish-swishing along her hull. Her decks were totally black. Even the compass light had been shut off and they were steering by sense, which a seaman will understand.

"Damn coming up to an unsurveyed island on a pitch dark night!" Bradley muttered to himself. "God knows what reefs there are and what we might run into. Yet we daren't make it by day. And thank God there's no moon!" He turned as a footstep sounded on the poop. "Who's that?"

"Seave, sir," came the gentle voice. "Boat's ready."

"Provision it for a week . . . in case. Food and water. Hatches for brush work. Lanterns . . . though we probably won't need them. Quinine. Spare tarpaulin for rain. Some red flares. Couple of boxes of Winchester shells, same for Colts. Dozen sticks of dynamite . . . better short fuse 'em ready."

"Yes, sir!" Seave went away. Barrett came up.

"Men you ordered are standing by, sir."

"Good! Lookout's for'ard watching for reefs or breakers?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Right! . . . Four points starboard, quartermaster!"

"Four points starboard, sir," said the helmsman who in private life was master and owner of one of the biggest full-riggers out of Sydney. In fact among the fifteen men who manned the *Sea King* that

night, ten were captains and owners, two were wealthy traders, three were planters. The cream of the Island aristocracy sailed that ghostly craft, slipping along in the pitch dark with the loom of the strange island on her port bow.

"Anything else, sir?" asked Barrett, his bean-pole height dim against the cloudy sky.

"Yes. Tell Seave and Gunther to go below. You go too then. I'll be down."

"Aye, aye, sir!" Barrett strode away, whistling between his teeth. His face was grim. The faces of all the fifteen men had been grim since the night they had left Apia, in silence and with haste, while all the men of shipping had watched, in silence too, and wondered what bloody tale would drift down from the north later on.

BRADLEY waited until the pin pricks of light had slid to the port quarter and disappeared behind some headland.

"Keep her as she goes!" he ordered.

"As she goes, sir!" echoed the helmsman.

"Call me if anything like a squall breaks!"

"Very good, sir!"

Bradley dropped down the pitch dark companion that led to the main cabin, which was even darker.

"All here?"

"All here, sir," said Barrett.

"All right. You can light the lamp. Skylight's covered and I've closed the hatch."

A match flickered and revealed Gunther. He lighted the lamp and the shadows receded. Bradley strode to a drawer under the big desk against one bulkhead and drew out a chart. He flung it on the table, flattened it and the rest of them held down the corners.

"Here's the island," said Bradley curtly, dabbing at a tiny unnamed speck north of Woodlark with his pencil point. "From the lights, all activities are centered here, on the south side. We're on this course, roughly." He drew a faint line. "We'll run north twenty miles, well out of sight, unless someone ashore climbs a hill, and you'll take in all upper canvas in case they do. We ought to be in position in two hours. Then we'll heave to. Seave, you'll take charge until I get back!"

"Until you get back?" Seave demanded.

"I'll see you. . . ." He checked himself and coughed. "Yes, sir!"

"Are you taking the short boat?" Barrett demanded, with heat. "I guess I want to get in on this." Bradley looked at him calmly.

"Do you want to take charge, Barrett?"

The tall man flushed and bit his lip.

"Sorry, sir!"

"But look here," said Gunther mildly.

"Not to make any objections . . . that is, you're the skipper. You ought to stay on board."

"If I'm the skipper I'm in command," said Bradley evenly. Gunther scratched his chin and swore.

"All right, go on . . . sir!" He swallowed hard. Bradley smiled a little. He knew he had faced a mutiny for a moment. They all wanted to go.

"SOMEONE has to carry on . . . if anything happens to me . . . or rather to those of us who are going. I'm landing to see what the lay of the land is. Once that's done we can plan better. If I'm not back within forty-eight hours . . . always allowing for bad weather . . . you, Seave, come next. You can designate who'll follow you. I advise you, if it comes to that, and there's only one of you remaining at last, to sail in and make a raid and chance it. But I think everything will be smooth.

"Now listen to me. It'll take me four or five hours to beat back to the island against this wind but I'll be there well before dawn. By mid-morning I should be able to get to the top of the island and see what's doing on the other side. The following night, if things look good, I'll burn a red flare. You'll run back toward the island after dark, Seave, in case I do, savvy? If there's no flare by dawn go back to your old place. Come in again next night. If no flare then, use your own judgment."

"What if we see your flare?" Seave demanded.

"Show a light in the mizzen rigging. I'll come to you and we'll make our war medicine. Right?"

"Right, sir!"

Bradley got out a glass and a bottle. He poured four drinks.

"Here's to luck and Cassidy!" They all drank. Bradley tightened his cartridge belt

and grunted. "I'll send my gang below for a shot before we go and I think I'll take a bottle along in case we get rained on. . . . Better shake, boys." He laughed and they all shook hands. "Remember," Bradley warned them, "If I get mine it's up to you fellows to carry on."

But he knew he did not need to say that. The *Sea King* would never leave the vicinity of that island unless she was either sunk or every man on board was dead.

"THERE it is," said Seave shortly, standing, in the dark by the weather rail. Barrett and Gunther both stared shoreward and both caught the faint flickering red glow of a flare. "Barrett, you'd better have a man in the chains for soundings. The water may shoal too quickly. Gunther, get a lantern ready in the mizzen rigging. . . . Ready about, quartermaster!"

They swung the *Sea King*, and she heeled over and neared the distant shore, the man in the chains monotonously crying, "No bottom, sir! No bottom, sir!" until it seemed they would run right on the beach. And then he got a sounding. "Twenty fathoms, sir!" Seave gave a crisp order and the *Sea King* hove to.

They all waited then, until presently, there came the muffled sound of oars in rowlocks and a small dot moved toward them.

"Typhoon?" called Seave.

"Stand by for our line," came Bradley's calm voice. The boat came alongside and a dozen hands helped her occupants on deck.

"You're damned close in," was Bradley's first comment. "Not a couple of cable's lengths off shore."

"We've still twenty fathoms under us, sir," said Seave.

"Right!" snapped Bradley crisply. "Lower the anchor, Barrett. Don't drop it and make a racket. Lower it, savvy? And haul it short. If anything happens we'll have to knock the shackle out of it and run."

"What did you find, sir?" Gunther demanded.

"Wait till the others get aft and I'll tell you. Muster all hands."

Fifteen minutes later fifteen men were crowded into the main cabin of the *Sea*

King, grouped about Bradley. He looked them over and nodded.

"All you fellers have been pretty white, giving your time and labor this way," he said. "It's only fair you should be at the final war council. We'll drop all formalities for a while and any suggestions will be welcome."

"Is it going to be a hard nut to crack?" demanded a square-built planter who could write his own check for fifty thousand pounds.

BRADLEY made a characteristic hitching motion with his belt.

"It's a cinch!" he said, with a laugh. "Not a guard this side of the island at all. They're evidently not expecting trouble . . . for that matter why should they? They don't know Cassidy's Kanaka bosun got clear. Now this is the lay-out!" He rapidly drew a sketch on a sheet of paper while they all watched. "I spent all afternoon spying through the glasses, and I think I've got it right. . . . The harbor's roughly oval with a large entrance and plenty of water to judge from the size of the cutter that's there. Here's a wharf. Here's a store-house of some sort back of the wharf. There's an armed guard posted there . . . changing every hour. Back here's a native village, pretty well deserted, and here's a new-built compound with sheds."

His pencil made rapid sweeps and they followed him intently. "The mine's up in this ravine and they've got about three hundred Kanakas working there . . . under whips. There's a smelter here. . . . I remember Cassidy loading that. All under one guard, that is the smelter. The natives at the mine have four, besides overseers, all Germans.

"Here, a hundred yards from the wharf, is Larsen's *Water Witch*, at anchor. Here, at the end of the wharf, is the cutter, and she's auxiliary fitted too. One gun aft and one for'ard which'd make it tough if she was after us. Judging from the fact that, toward sunset, a guard and a servant of some sort took a big kit of food and a water jar to the after house, I judge Cassidy and Chang are still where Noama told me they were, locked in the cutter's brig.

"So far as I could make out the cutter has three men on guard all the time. One on the bridge, one for'ard and one aft. The

gold's in a strong room mid-ships. I saw Black Dutch and Larsen and the rest sprawled on the lower bridge drinking. Apparently they don't go ashore much." He stared round at the intent faces.

"Now, here's what I figure, and I'm willing to accept any advice. After dark the native workers are herded into the compound. You speak about every dialect in the Islands, Barrett, so that'll be your job. You and three men land tonight and get yourselves in hiding ready to jump the compound. If you can grab hold of someone who's left in the village and make him or her savvy beforehand, okay. The idea will be to let the workers out and start them rioting. . . . I know it's rotten tactics to set Kanakas on white men but . . . we're fighting an empire."

THEY all nodded, grim-faced and silent.

"If you can, Barrett, get them to set fire to the compound fence and the huts. I want principally to draw what men I can from the cutter, savvy?"

Barrett grunted.

"Think you can handle that? Your job's the most difficult."

Barrett rubbed the butt of his gun and grunted again.

"When do I start?" he demanded. Bradley smiled.

"Just as soon as I'm through . . . unless anyone has a better plan. Well, we leave the *Sea King* here . . . if Gunther doesn't mind chancing her dragging or getting blown ashore in a sudden squall!"

"She's in th' pot," snapped Gunther. "Get on with something important."

"All right then," said Bradley. "The rest of us pile into the boats, get round to the harbor and jump the cutter."

Seave grunted.

"You mean we jump the cutter, grab Cassidy and Chang and make a run for it, after dropping some dynamite into her engines?"

"I do not," snapped Bradley. "I mean we take the damned cutter!"

They stared at him, appalled at his audacity, and then the beauty of the thing appealed to them and they all laughed. To take a fine cutter away from the German empire would be good.

"I'll explain why I want the cutter later

on . . . if we get away with this," promised Bradley. "Now then, the whole thing depends on timing. We've got to be in the harbor when Barrett starts his stuff. I figure he ought to get busy just at midnight . . . that is with the fire. He might be able to get in some work with one of the villagers before that, have the man or woman get into the compound to explain what's going to happen to the Kanakas who are there. Unless I miss a bet they'll be all hot to break loose."

"You leave that to me," Barrett grunted. "Right then, Barrett times his fire or riot or what he can to start at midnight. The chances are, all but a few guards will be rushed ashore. Chances are Black Dutch and the rest will be rushed ashore. We're waiting in the boats and we jump the cutter. We get her to sea, tow her if we have to. Barrett beats it back across the island as soon as he's done his stuff. Then he pulls out and mans the *Sea King* until we get alongside and can arrange other things."

HE flung down his pencil and looked around.

"Anyone figure anything better?"

"Perfect if . . . things go right," said Stinger Seave drily. "It all depends on timing, though."

"That's what I said," Bradley agreed. "Has anyone got a better plan?"

They looked at each other, questioning, and they all shook their heads.

"O.K.," said Barrett. "Let's get going!"

"The only thing that gripes me," said Gunther, "is that, according to your figuring, none of us get a crack at Black Dutch and the rest."

Bradley smiled thinly.

"It isn't a question of revenge now. It's a question of getting Cassidy and Chang. The other can come later." The other two nodded.

"In any case," observed Stinger Seave, "it's Cassidy's deal."

"That's correct," Barrett agreed. "Cassidy'll want to even things himself. I never did like spoiling another man's fight."

"Thanks," said Bradley. "As a matter of fact I think losing the gold and being forced to stay on this island until the German governor sends out a relief party will be punishment enough. We'll drop some

dynamite into Larsen's craft as we pass her."

"All right," Gunther agreed, shrugging. "But I came north expecting a lot of shooting and I haven't even pulled a trigger yet!"

"Let's hope you won't have to," laughed Bradley. "There are a lot of ways to kill a cat besides drowning it!"

VI

LIEUTENANT HOFFMAN was, as usual, in a jovial mood. He had finished dinner long since and it had been an excellent dinner, considering all things. He had imbibed two quarts of champagne by himself, and he had spent half an hour looking at the gold ingots stacked in the strong room. The night was dark but starry. The wind was cool. The native women he had chosen for the evening were good-looking, though he had not commanded his orderly to bring them yet. It was pleasant to anticipate.

In short, life was good, and Lieutenant Hoffman leaned alone on the for'ard rail of the cutter's deck and stared at the dark, calm water, enjoying himself and twisting his waxed blond mustache. From midships he caught the sound of Black Dutch's voice asking Larsen something, and he frowned.

"It is too bad his Excellency the Governor made the agreement with these pigs," he said regretfully to himself. "We could have shared the gold together . . . between us. Ah, well!"

He sighed and then something happened that made him straighten and grow rigid as a board. A hard, thin object pressed against his ribs, and an unpleasant voice spoke into his ear:

"Keep quite still!" Lieutenant Hoffman had no intention of moving. He recognized the muzzle of a gun and he did not want his spine blown in two. Strong hands whipped his arms behind him. Other hands thrust a wad of something into his mouth and fastened it there. In less than thirty seconds Lieutenant Hoffman was helpless. His captors whirled him around and his goggling eyes saw several dark shapes, each of them stripped down to a loin cloth.

Muscular, trim bodies, naked save for this cloth, for gun-belts about the waists,

blackened canvas shoes, and masks of black cloth fastened about the faces. Bradley wanted no recognitions made . . . in case things did slip later . . . and he knew that white duck shows plain on the darkest of nights.

"Got the guard aft there?" Bradley muttered. A lithe little man padded up and grunted. "All clear!"

There was a tight silence. Lieutenant Hoffman wondered how these men had gained his ship without being seen, and he did not understand that every one of the raiders had served his time in the jungle as well as on the sea.

As a matter of fact, the cutter's for'ard guard had been leaning lazily on the rail, gazing toward the shore, when the two boats from the *Sea King* had slid alongside with muffled oars. The cutter had a low free-board and Seave, the lightest of the party, had stood on Bradley's shoulders and dropped aboard, to lower a line first and then attend to the guard. The rest had been easy so far.

"It's about time for Barrett to start," someone muttered. Bradley grunted.

"We'll give him another five minutes and then we'll go ahead anyway."

"WHAT are we going to do with this?" someone else said, jerking a gun muzzle into Lieutenant Hoffman's side.

"Stick close to him. He's an officer, by his uniform. May come in handy."

"There!" snapped Gunther, pointing, and a red glow leaped to view from the direction of the compound. There was a crackle of rifle shots followed by the dull, ominous roar of rioting natives, and then came the sharp, staccato thud of exploding dynamite. You could always trust Barrett to do a job properly.

A whistle shrilled out on the cutter. A guttural voice barked orders. The crouching men aft could hear Gentleman Harry's sudden oath and his cry, "The swine're jumping the guards. Grab your guns and come on."

"Where's Hoffman?" came Larsen's crisp tones. "Say, you, go and find the Lieutenant!"

"Come on!" said Gentleman Harry, and they heard him run down the gangway and pound along the wharf. A dozen of the

German seamen followed him, trotting in good order under command of an officer. Larsen, Black Dutch and Caradoc followed behind, shouting to each other. It was obvious that three hundred natives could not be allowed to run wild, perhaps burn and destroy all the mining machinery and almost certainly kill all the overseers and guards. A German sailor came running aft calling out for Lieutenant Hoffman and something rose up out of a shadow and hit him neatly under the jaw. He dropped without a word and Bradley grunted.

"All right. Come on, Carstairs, you hang on to that officer. Seave, take four of the boys and work along the port side. Make it quick. Don't shoot unless you have to. I'll handle the starboard deck." He snapped out the orders.

They were gone then, racing grimly midships. A white-jacketed steward was neatly put out as he came from the saloon to view the shore fire. A grimy-faced engineer was tumbled back into his cabin and securely bound and gagged. It was over in less than ten minutes, and then Bradley was on the cutter's bridge and a horde of nearly naked demons sweated at the bow and stern casting off the lines. Gunther came up.

"The wind's fair enough," he stated. Bradley nodded and started at the sky.

"It's a blind run for us," he said grimly. "We don't know the channel. But we'll chance it."

"Looked wide enough to me as we came in," Gunther grunted. "Can't we get the engine going?"

"Who the hell knows anything about engines?" Bradley demanded.

"Well, there's a coupla fellers below who must. Germans we've laid out. Let me pitch a bucket of water on 'em and talk to 'em."

"Go ahead," Bradley shrugged. "It'll take a long time to get up steam, I suppose, and you might as well start now."

GUNTHER sighed and stalked away, rubbing his gun-butt with the palm of his hand. The cutter was pushed clear from the wharf. One by one her sails went up, filled with dull reports and drew her onward. There was no alarm at first from the shore. Every soul was gathered around the roaring fire of the compound,

and around the newer fire that seemed to have taken the native village.

It was not until there came the hard reports of the dynamite bombs that Bradley tossed on board Larsen's ship as he passed her, that those ashore woke up. By then a horde of frenzied Kanakas almost had the white men surrounded, forcing them to retreat to the wharf.

"Am I going mad?" Larsen choked. "Where's the cutter? Look at my ship in flames! That Hoffman!"

The same thought came to each of them. Hoffman had taken this opportunity to slip off with all the gold, leaving them to fight their own way clear as best they could. The night was split by oaths and frenzied threats, but not for long. Another and more serious matter pressed. Leaping, shouting Kanakas were advancing toward the wharf, at the water end of which the survivors of the overseers, the guards and the others, were trapped.

"Steady," growled Black Dutch. He shut the bolt of his rifle. "We'll figure on the cutter later. Let 'em have it!" They smashed two volleys down the wharf and the mob of Kanakas dissolved, and then backed away.

"Never even left us a whale boat!" snarled Gentleman Harry. "Just left us here to be starved to death."

Nobody answered him. There was nothing to say. And out clear of the harbor, Bradley was turning the bridge over to one of the captains.

"Keep her as she goes. I've got something important to do."

"As she goes, sir," grunted the captain and walked to the compass which glimmered beneath its tiny light. Gunther came up from below, rubbing his hands together and chuckling.

"I told you I'd manage it. They promise me steam in another hour and then we can use the engine."

"Good man," said Bradley. "You're appointed Chief Engineer until further notice. But come on with me now. There's something to be done."

He picked up Seave and the three of them went aft, armed with a lantern.

"Know where Cassidy's being held?" Bradley demanded of a man who had been working aft.

"From the way he's cussing, he's in the

after house," said the man with a grin. "Been yelling to us to hurry up and let him loose and telling us what he thought of us."

THEY all laughed and went on, and presently Bradley held his lantern up and let the light fall through the bars of the prison door. Cassidy's emaciated and tired face was colored by a purple tinge of wrath.

"Damn you, Bradley! I know your voice. Why in hell didn't you let me go first off?"

"Think we ought to let him go?" Bradley demanded, turning to Gunther. Gunther frowned and spat.

"Don't know as we should. Looks t' me like he's got hydrophobia!"

"I'll . . . I'll . . ." Cassidy choked and then beside him there rose the slender form of Chang and the Chinaman laid a hand on the other's shoulder.

"Be still," he said soothingly. "They only jest with you."

Bradley unlocked the door with a key he had found on Lieutenant Hoffman, and Seave helped Cassidy outside. The old man was very weak, his knees trembling, and they saw he had his arm bandaged to his side, from a wound as he profanely informed them. They took him into the ornate saloon 'midships, Chang following, and they sat him before a stiff whiskey and soda.

"It's a hell of a fine bunch you are!" he spluttered, after drinking. "Where in hell have you been all this time? I've been locked up for months! Months, damn it! You ought to have been here ages ago."

They stood around him and grinned, for they knew he did not mean that. They knew he knew they had come as soon as they had heard, as soon as they could, that they had left their own businesses to go to pieces for his sake. So they grinned and said nothing, and after a while Cassidy stared up at them, his old eyes going slowly from face to face, and then something cracked and two drops welled down his cheeks.

"I don't know what to say . . ." he muttered.

"Oh, hell," said Bradley. "Let's get out of here for a spell." So they all trooped

on deck and, unlocking the strong room, examined the gold ingots which Black Dutch and the rest had so kindly accumulated for them.

VII

IT was just after dawn when the cutter *Wilhelmina* came alongside the *Sea King*, still at anchor off the coast, on the other side of the island. That all had gone well was evident, for Jack Barrett's six feet six of lean height could be seen on her poop deck and the men who had been with him waved from midships.

Bradley shouted for them all to come over for a conference, and this was held in the ornate cutter's saloon with all hands present at breakfast. It was a triumphant assembly. They had not lost a man, not even had one wounded. They had lifted a fine, fast cutter, an incredible amount of gold and two important prisoners right from under the noses of their old enemies, not to say right from under the Imperial German flag.

Cassidy was more his old self now, dressed in some clean ducks, his white mustache and his hair clipped and trimmed, a touch of color back in his cheeks. Chang seemed the same as ever, quite as though he had not suffered captivity.

"Well," said Bradley at last, pushing away his plate and lighting a cheroot. "So far so good."

"But we ought to have taken a crack at Black Dutch and Larsen and the others," grumbled Big Bill Gunther. "I don't like th' idea of letting them Kanakas wipe 'em out."

"They won't be wiped out," advised Barrett calmly. "I told the chief of that village that the best thing he could do would be to pile his people and their belongings into their canoes and get to some other island. He said he would. I told him it wouldn't be long before another ship would come with guns and many men, and if it was found there had been any killing and burning there would be a swift payment. I think I got the old boy scared, and he'll beat it as soon as he can gather up the loose ends and get his young men's attention."

"That's a relief to know," said Seave. "I don't like the idea of leaving white men

in a jam like that, without even a boat. If the natives beat it, they'll be all right, of course, until the Germans send another craft to find out why all the delay."

"So I can figure on Black Dutch and Larsen coming through, eh?" said Cassidy, rubbing his hands and beaming. He suddenly straightened his face and glared around. "You fellers just lay off them, see? It's my deal and I'll attend to 'em."

"Don't talk that way, Cassidy," said Bradley after a pause. "You're not as young as you were and you can't go gunning all over the South against a crowd like that. Let me and the boys take the cards. . . ."

CASSIDY exploded.

"Not as young as I was, eh? Well, maybe I can't go gunning around, but there's other ways. I'm not such an old fool as you think and I'll make every damned one of that mob sweat blood for holding me up. You lay off!"

Bradley shrugged and laughed.

"All right! . . . And now let's figure what next. I think we ought to make it a clean job while we're at it."

"What else is there?" demanded Barrett. "I've got to get back to business."

"Well," said Bradley carefully, "I was thinking that Cassidy's ship, the *Sadow*, is being held up north. Seems to me, as a matter of honor, we can't leave her. That's why I brought along the cutter, for that little job."

There was a dead silence and then suddenly Gunther chuckled.

"Do you mean to sit there and suggest we sail right into Konstantinhafen and lift the *Sadow* from under their noses?"

"Why not?" challenged Bradley. Stinger Seave stared at him and a thin smile twisted his lips.

"Typhoon," he said gently, "I could love you for that!"

And then the tension snapped and they stood up and yelled at him. Someone pulled the cork from a bottle and they all drank. This was something that had never been done before in the South. It was carrying on a private war with a vengeance. They would teach the Imperial Government that it was not a good thing to interfere with free-lance traders and adventur-

ers. And then, when the noise had died down, Bradley took command again.

"We'll transfer the gold to the *Sea King*. She's to follow behind us. We won't use coal until we're close to the harbor, but I think this cutter can sail about as fast as the *Sea King*. Anyway, we'll manage it. Barrett, you can pick out eight of the fellers to help you sail her. I'll keep the rest with me. We'll discuss what else later. Right?"

"Right it is," grunted Barrett. "And you want me to transport the gold now?"

"That's the idea."

Cassidy cleared his throat.

"About the damned gold, we'll split it even all round. Chang's my partner in this and agreeable. You men have lost time and business chasing up here and there's enough of the metal to cover everything."

THEY would have argued about that, but Cassidy hammered on the table with his clenched fists and bellowed at them.

"Shut up! I know what I'm talking about. Damn it, I was sailing ships and looting islands before half of you were born. Share and share alike or I pitch the whole junk overside."

"You're a confounded nuisance, Cassidy," said Bradley at last. "But have it your own way." The party broke up. Bradley went out on deck with Barrett.

"Did you have much trouble arranging that riot ashore?" he asked him. "Hasn't been time to inquire before."

"It was a cinch," answered Barrett. "I caught a coupla Kanakas on the edge of the village, an old man and a young girl. Had a little trouble making them understand I was a friend . . . they'd been treated pretty rough by the Germans . . . but once they got the idea they entered into the spirit of the thing. We waited until dark when the other Kanakas, the workers, had been herded into the compound, and then the girl got to making love with one of the guards while the old man shinned over the stockade and explained what was going to happen to the others. It all went pretty smooth. They piled brush up under the sheds around midnight, like I'd told 'em to, and they set it off about the same time I blew down half the wall with dynamite. Carstairs set a torch to

the village and then we all sprayed a little lead around to keep the guards guessing. It was a sweet mess."

They both laughed then and turned their attention to the transferring of the gold.

VIII

TO this very day, the real story of the raid on Konstantinshafen has never been explained, at least not to the entire satisfaction of the Imperial Government. There are some facts of the matter, however, that are quite plain, and are very painful remembrances. The thing began when the small launch of the harbor night patrol churned out into the narrow channel that led from the harbor to the sea, her one white occupant and her two native occupants swearing sleepily in their respective languages. Swearing about nothing in particular.

"Ach, for why should any ship come in so late?" demanded the German of the stars. "There is no bad weather outside!"

No one could answer him, and he turned the little wheel, grumbling continuously. It was very close to two o'clock in the morning and he had been sleeping when one of his native crew had reported the lights of a ship coming in. And so here he was running alongside her, and he recognized her almost instantly.

"The *Wilhelmina*! . . . We did not expect her so soon." He stopped the launch's engine and let her drift, hailing the cutter. "Lieutenant Hoffman?"

A head and shoulders loomed over the poop rail and Lieutenant Hoffman's voice, strangely hoarse, answered back.

"Ah, Weinberg? Too bad to get you out so late. But I have important news for his Excellency. Is he still here?"

"He is entertaining the officers of the *Kaiser Augusta*," said Weinberg, scratching his unshaven jaw and wondering why the usually genial Hoffman did not invite him on board. He could not know that a gun was digging into the small of the Lieutenant's back and that that gun was held by a very grim Typhoon Bradley.

"Well, I will anchor and come ashore," said the Lieutenant with effort. "And . . . ah . . . Weinberg, where did you place that *Sandow* I sent north with a prize crew?"

"Over there, in the lee of the Kronprinz

shoal," yawned Weinberg, waving in the starlight

"Good. Then will you report me to his Excellency?"

"He doesn't like being disturbed at this hour," grumbled Weinberg but he spun the launch's wheel and chugged back toward the shore. Bradley laughed a little.

"Good work, Lieutenant. . . . Are the boats ready, Stinger?"

"All ready, sir," snapped Seave. Bradley grunted and holstered his gun. "Better tie Hoffman up again in case he gets heroic and starts yelling. . . . You've all got your instructions, so beat it!"

GUNTHER and Seave started away. The cutter slid farther into the harbor, skirted the Kronprinz shoal and stopped across the anchored bow of the *Sandow* upon which vessel a single light glimmered, showing she had a watchman at least. The cutter had not yet come to rest when two boats dropped from her and were alongside Cassidy's ship. It was quick, sharp work then. The German watchman was asleep below and bothered no one. The sentry guarding the wharf ashore curiously watched the *Sandow* move toward the sea in the tow of the cutter which he recognized. He did not give the alarm. The patrol launch had been out and was evidently satisfied. There must be some secret scheme in the wind.

Right out to the channel the cutter towed the *Sandow*, men on board of her loosening the sails until she had sufficient canvas up to make her own way. Then the cutter slipped back, to pick up the one whale boat that had remained. This boat had been speeding here and there among the shipping, and there were over a dozen craft of all shapes and sizes lying in Konstantinshafen that night, besides the *Kaiser Augusta*, the new man-o'-war just out from home for service in the Pacific.

It was neatly and swiftly done. Not over an hour elapsed from the time the patrol launch visited the cutter until the cutter was taking men aboard from the remaining boat, and depositing other men, helpless men, into her.

Cassidy and Seave and one boatload of men had gone with the *Sandow*. This remaining boat had been commanded by Gunther, and the big man was shaking all

over with laughter when he joined Bradley.

"Cut four of the schooners loose," he reported, holding his side. "By God, there'll be a nice mix-up! I managed to knock the shackles of a big brig and a bark free. Scared to spend too much time."

"That's enough damage for one night," Bradley agreed, chuckling. "Look at 'em!"

The ships which Gunther had cut free from their anchors were drifting toward the shoals and drifting together with the tide. A few scattered shouts and oaths began to rack the night, and the sleepy crews tumbled on deck. Two of the schooners collided with a splintering crash that woke the echoes. The brig rammed into another schooner and sank her. There was a beautiful shipping tangle in Konstantinshafen that was to take many days and several court suits to straighten out.

THE launch of the night patrol came churning from the shore again, Weinberg finally full of suspicions. He ran alongside the cutter and stared up at the many heads looking down at him.

"What damned foolishness is this?" he demanded. "Lieutenant Hoffman. . ."

That was as far as he got. A heavy snatch block whizzed down and went through the launch's bottom, leaving its three occupants struggling in the water. Typhoon Bradley leaned overside and waved his hand.

"We're just going to cast off a whale-boat we've got trailing astern of us," he said. "Maybe you noticed it? You'll find some of your friends there."

The cutter suddenly picked up speed, leaving a whale boat rocking in her wake. Weinberg and his two natives swam to it and climbed aboard, and there they found Lieutenant Hoffman, bound and gagged, and bound and gagged with him, some half a dozen other men. Weinberg swore when he had got his breath back and then he cut the Lieutenant free.

"Fooled! Fooled! Fooled!" raved the Lieutenant, shaking his fists at the stars. "Weinberg, you have lead for brains!"

"They got the cutter and the *Sandow*. They have wrecked the shipping."

"There's no time to rave!" said Weinberg savagely. "We must do something. There is the *Kaiser Augusta* in port."

"Ach, yes." Lieutenant Hoffman cooled

suddenly and managed a laugh. "The *Kaiser Augusta* is here. Put out the oars, fool, and pull me to her. She has the newer engines and will catch the cutter and the others. Pull, man!"

"There are no oars," warned Weinberg. "They left no oars here!"

And so it was the whale boat had to drift for nearly an hour, her crew yelling at the top of their lungs, unheeded because of the clamoring from the drifting ships. His Excellency the Governor came down to view the scene in his flowered silk dressing gown, and he grew more and more apoplectic as reports reached him.

The captain of the *Kaiser Augusta* was already on board, swearing at his engineers for steam. And finally someone heard the frantic hails from the oarless whale boat and picked it up. Immediately all became plain to the Governor, as Lieutenant Hoffman reported, but even so he wasted a good ten minutes cursing his officer before he hurried with him on to the new man-o'-war where they were casting off the lines and preparing to back out into the harbor.

ON board the cutter the last preparations had been made. All hands were waiting in a boat alongside. The cutter was at rest, both her bow anchors holding her, and a third anchor snaked out aft to prevent the current and the wind swinging her round. She was very low in the water.

"I guess that's all," said Bradley one foot over the rail, and taking a last look around. "That fuse ought to be about burned down."

He dropped lightly into the whale boat and it pushed off. A sail was hoisted and the boat heeled, running for the sea. She had not gone more than a quarter of a mile when a violent explosion came from the direction of the cutter, and a livid splash of flame lit the sky.

"That's finished her," said Gunther shortly.

"The open sea cocks would have been enough," said Bradley, "but I wanted to be sure."

Ten minutes later they were all climbing on board the *Sandow* that was waiting for them. The whale boat was hoisted and the *Sandow* ran south to join the *Sea King*. Together the two ships fled back to their own waters, while behind them, com-

ing out of Konstantinshafen harbor at full speed, the new man-o'-war *Kaiser Augusta* ran smack into a sunken cutter that blocked the whole channel. She went down in twenty minutes and his Excellency the Governor had to swim ashore. It was an expensive night for the Imperial Government. They lost a warship, a cutter, a launch, a great deal of gold and an even greater amount of dignity.

"Well, that's that!" said Cassidy on the *Sandow*, pacing up and down the poop with Bradley, Seave and Gunther. "Now all there is left is to settle my private accounts with Black Dutch and the others."

"You'd better let Seave and me handle that," said Bradley bluntly. "You can't go gallivanting around shooting up the Islands at your age."

"Never you mind," bellowed Cassidy. "I've got a few ways of my own!" And he had.

Back in Apia, Cassidy wrote a long and confidential letter to the highest official in the Australian administration, a man he had once had as his supercargo. As a direct result a member of Parliament rose in the House of Commons in London and asked a question of the Foreign Secretary. As a direct result of that his Excellency the Governor was suddenly called home from Konstantinshafen to answer many embarrassing questions while Lieutenant Hoffman was transferred to an obscure African post and permanently forgotten.

IN Brisbane, a police officer tapped Caradoc on the shoulder and arrested him on an old murder charge he had thought forgotten. He drew ten years. Gentleman Harry was rudely and suddenly shanghaied out of Saigon aboard an American whaler, a notorious hardcase packet bound on a two years' cruise of the Antarctic. Strangely enough she already had her full crew when she took the trouble to snake Gentleman Harry aboard.

In Singapore, Larsen's favorite girl, one of whom he was genuinely fond, received a tempting offer from a new admirer, and left for parts unknown. The maddening thing about that was that someone spread the story round the clubs, and someone had made up a little song which the natives sang in the bazaars. Larsen would sooner have been shot than lost prestige that way.

As for Black Dutch, he bought a fine big bark called the *Delfdyke* while he was in Batavia, and before he had time to insure her, she mysteriously burned to the water-line, so ruining him that he had to ship as second mate of a coasting boat. The coincidences were all remarkable, but just so there would be no mistake each one of the four conspirators received, right after disaster had overtaken them, a little slip of paper in Cassidy's handwriting.

PAID IN FULL. CASSIDY.

"Call me an old man, will they?" bellowed Cassidy. "I'll show 'em!"



FRTZ HELWIG was dead—murdered violently before a hundred unsuspecting witnesses. That was the beginning. Four more times the Grim Reaper struck. Silently. . . . Terribly . . . in spite of all that Maxwell Blythe, Broadway playboy, and his lovely, sleuth-struck ex-wife could do to spike the murder guns of THE DEATH SYNDICATE. * * * Be sure to read this thrilling, complete book-length murder mystery by Judson P. Philips in the current **DETECTIVE BOOK**. Other novelets and short stories by Stewart Sterling, Jos. H. Hernandez, Franklin P. Martin and Gilbert K. Griffiths.

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RODEO WRANGLER

By CLIFFE MANVILLE

"Out of Chute number One—the world's champeen on Son of Cain!" Sande Bennett rode the vicious killer-bronc to a fare-thee-well. Not for money. Not for fame—but to kill the aching memory of a laughing, golden-haired dude girl.

SALINAS was preened and festive in anticipation of her annual four-day celebration as Sande Bennett of Malibu, entered town. There was an elec-

tric thrill of holiday in the perennial heat of the lettuce capital. Buildings and streets were decorated; high-crowned hats were everywhere; high-heeled spurred boots

clicked along the sidewalks; cow ponies and decorative mounts of more thoughtful breeding moved in and out of the heavy automobile traffic on Main Street.

But the usual thrill of anticipation Sande Bennett experienced entering town for a rodeo, was missing. Sande's mind was troubled.

He guided the car with its one horse-padded trailer carefully through the crowds, and shot out the highway on the north side of town to the arena a mile or so farther on. Later, his top horse Zick comfortably stabled in a box stall and fed, the trailer parked, Sande returned to town in search of quarters for himself. He found some presently in a small, side street hostelry, and having deposited his gear, descended to the street to look about. His prospects were sour, Sande thought.

Just before he'd left the quiet of his little polo pony ranch tucked away in the hills back of Malibu Beach, Sande had received a note from Charlie Darbley—Director Charlie Darbley, who was a regular polo pony client of Sande's. The note disclosed that a niece of Charlie's fresh from the Middle-west would be at the Jeffery Hotel during the entire four days. Would Sande see that she was looked after and had a good time? "She's never seen a rodeo," Darbley had concluded, "and she's dying to."

Sande was apprehensive. In the first place he didn't care for the general run of women—any women, particularly, for that matter; and hadn't since eight years ago when a girl he'd pinned his world to, ran out on him. In the second place this was a business trip for Sande and he didn't like the idea of playing host to some punk kid out for her first horse circus. But, business was business and Darbley bought polo ponies, and from time to time brought others who bought polo ponies, so what the hell. He sighed resignedly.

It was Sande's last year out; his last rodeo in fact, since by some mix-up in schedules Cheyenne and Salinas were holding their annual affairs simultaneously this year. By Sunday night the new world's champion would be acclaimed and Sande Bennett, twice holder of that title, would no longer grace the rodeo arenas of the country. He was grimly glad it was over. Nine long years he'd spent in this most

deadly of all man games. Time indeed, he called it quits. Besides his little Malibu ranch after six years of hard work was beginning to show surprising profits.

He turned in at Cowboy Headquarters, an empty storeroom with one end boarded off except for a counter and money window. The place was smoky and crowded. Old friends and rivals were re-uniting; Sande was warmly hailed from a half dozen groups. He dropped in line toward the window and presently paid entry fees in the six events carrying Rodeo Association of America ratings. He found his old friend Steve Cawkey, grizzled wolfer of the Arizona border country in the crowd. Sande had known Steve since his first year, and he made arrangements to work with him in the two-man events.

IN front of the Jeffery Hotel, Sande bumped into Jerry Griffith. Jerry bought horses from Sande, too.

"Hi, old son," the actor greeted him. "Just in time, come on up to the room and have a highball. You're riding I see by the papers. No one would ever pick you for a cowboy in that rig."

Sande's lean bronzed frame was draped in gray slacks and a soft blue sweater. He was hatless. "How are you, Jerry. . . I'm not an actor, what's the matter with this rig?"

"You don't look the part of a champion cowboy."

"It's being, not looking the part in my business," Sande laughed. There was a crowd in Jerry's suite of rooms. Sande knew most of them. You get to know practically everybody in pictures, raising and training polo ponies.

He was having a highball and talking with Ace Cameraman Tommy Lanson, when Jerry came up leading a girl. "A dream walking, no less," thought Sande.

"Here he is, Jane," Jerry said. "A real honest-to-God champion cowboy. Sande, this is Jane."

"Hello Jane," Sande said.

"Hello Sande. You don't look like a cowboy."

"As I was telling Jerry, I'm not an actor." His voice was light, easy, but something had happened to him inside. It had to do with the rich cadence of her voice. A low voice, yet it seemed to have

set up a humming vibration in Sande's head. But there was some even more subtle alchemy that swept through him. He felt his pulse quicken in her presence—strangely had the feeling she was experiencing something of the same thing.

"I've never seen a rodeo," she said. "I can hardly wait until tomorrow. I love horses." She smiled, a slow smile that made her features and skin glow with an inner radiance. There was an elusive, fiery glint in the rich folds of her dark red hair, a veiled, greenish, dazzling light in the depths of her eyes.

"You'll see one," Sande said huskily, thinking he hadn't felt this way in eight long years. "She's got something," he told himself, and asked: "Are you in pictures?"

"No," she answered slowly. "Just friends of some people. We're going down to Del Monte for dinner and dancing, will you go along?"

"I can't, and I'm sorry about it," Sande said. "Charlie Darbley's got some punk kid of a niece here in Salinas and I'm supposed to be guardian or something. I'm going to look her up after dinner. I always seem to get breaks like that."

"Can't you just forget or something?" There was a laughing, luring light in her eyes.

"No, this is business. You see I raise polo ponies, and Darbley buys them. Besides, Charlie's a good friend of mine. How about tomorrow, will you be here?" Her answer was important.

"I'm not sure. Sorry you can't go along."

"So am I. Better stay the rest of the week," Sande told her, "Sunday's our best day."

She laughed and said: "You never can tell."

HE had shaved and showered and changed into street clothes, managed a thick broiled steak and miscellaneous accouterments, but Sande hadn't been able to throw off the dismal feeling of injustice in not having been able to accompany Jerry's party, or rather Jane, to Del Monte.

He sent up his name and waited in the Jeffery lobby for his charge to come down, studying meanwhile the gay crowd moving in and out through the swinging doors to the street. Suddenly someone touched him

lightly on the shoulder. He turned rising.

"Jane!"

"Did I frighten you?" she asked. "Just a punk kid niece of Charlie Darbley's?"

"You! Impossible. I'd never get a break like that! You can't be *the* Miss Witmer!"

"Jane Witmer herself in person," she laughed. "And don't forget its good for the polo pony business to see that I have a good time."

"I wasn't counting on a niece of Charlie Darbley's being you. I can't believe it."

"You're not disappointed?"

"You know better." Sande was swept with sudden elation. "You're far too gorgeous. I'll have to carry a shooting iron to keep you to myself. Remember I'm your guardian by special order." She took his arm. Sande didn't miss the fact that all eyes turned their way as they crossed the short lobby to the street door.

"Where to, Sande?"

"Do you mind stopping in for the bronc drawings—I should be there."

"I want to. Why, why it's like being taken right into the cult. Tell me, is Salinas a real rodeo—I mean, it isn't just a put on show?"

"It's as good as any of them. Right up there in the top flight with Pendleton, Cheyenne, Prescott and Calgary. One's as good as another, but of course Calgary is wilder and tougher than the rest—there not being a humane society up there to protect us boys."

Her laughter rippled on the night air.

THEY walked side by side the long block to headquarters. Sande tall and slender and straight, the girl small and graceful beside him, her head barely reaching the point of his shoulder.

She confided she had just come to California from Ohio for the summer with her father, stressing the point that she had wanted to see a rodeo all her life and at last was going to—four whole days of rodeo. "I'll try not to be a nuisance," she finished.

"Forget that punk kid business, will you?" Sande said.

It was past nine and most of the hundred odd contestants were present. Only forty or fifty of these would ride, but being on

hand at the bronco drawings is traditional with circuit followers.

Sande saw Cal Kardic the state champion turn and stare at Jane, then come forward. "Hi, Sande. How you doing, fellow?" Gaily.

"How are you, Cal?" Sande said.

"Fine. We've a hoss that ain't a hoss at all but a quick-fuse and dynamite, this meetin', Sande. Have you looked him up? Son of Cain. He's the one I can't get far enough from." It was apparent Cal intended to have an introduction.

"That's the old ballyhoo, Cal. They always have a new one that's the bad-badest in history. It's good publicity."

Cal's narrow dark eyes hardened. "I know that, well as you do, Sande, but Son of Cain killed Ardy Shattuck at Valencia two weeks ago, and Ardy could ride. I saw it!" A visible shiver passed through the two-hundred pounds of the rider's frame.

"That so, Cal? I'm sure sorry to hear that. I liked Ardy. Maybe they have got a horse this meeting. . . . Oh, pardon, this is Cal Kardic—Miss Witmer, Cal."

"I'm glad to know you, Mr. Kardic. Tell me more about this horse. Do they really kill their riders?" she asked incredulously.

Cal's round face brightened. "This one has killed two men, badly broken up a half dozen others. Every once in a while an outlaw comes along. This one's the worst type—a cinchbinder."

"So?" said Sande. "Only one thing good for that—a pistol butt right between the ears."

"Sure, but you can't pack a gun in the arena. Rules."

"What's a cinchbinder mean?" Jane asked.

"A horse that throws himself over backwards purposely to fall on his rider," Sande explained.

"Alright boys, line up." They turned. A big sombrero was shaken now by a lean elderly man, and the contestants began to line up and pass by for the drawing. Presently Sande reached in, shook loose a single scrap of paper and unfolded it slowly.

"Who'd you pick?" Cal asked.

"Sand Man," said Sande dryly. "That's no way to treat a fellow the first afternoon. Maybe they don't want me around here after tomorrow."

"Is he as bad as that?" Jane wanted to know.

"He's enough. That old gray octopus has ruined a lot of good boys' hopes." Sande shouldered their way through the crowd. "How about some beer and a dance or two?"

"An inspiration," she laughed.

They drove the eighteen miles to Del Monte where for an hour or so they danced. They were quiet mostly—Sande liked it that way, and the girl seemed to fall into his mood naturally. Driving back, shortly before midnight in a flood of moonlight, Sande knew a sense of complete happiness, and yet there was a restless, electric undercurrent—as if they were both tuned in on the same wave-length. He studied her from time to time out of the corner of his eye as he idled along. It occurred to him to stop and take her in his arms. She wouldn't mind perhaps, probably expected him to. But something told him it would break this spell he had felt in her presence since the first moment of meeting. That was the last thing he wanted to do. At the hotel he took her hand in his—cool, slender, strong.

"I've had a grand evening, Sande. I'm pulling for you tomorrow."

"Dinner tomorrow night?" he asked anxiously.

"Swell."

Lying in the dark alone in his room, Sande still sensed that strange elation. He didn't sleep until toward dawn.

THE Malibu rider knew again, as always, that wild reckless thrill of the rodeo arena; the sun and dust and sweat and the mad struggle of man and beast—cunning and skill, against speed and beef and bone.

He moved through the bull riding, calf roping, team roping, and other events with high scores. He was going good.

There were some good rides, some sudden upsets that first afternoon. Cal Kardic made a nearly perfect score on that bad medicine, Billy the Kid. Gary Salters' exhibition on St. Louis Blues was classic, and Steve Cawkins made a good showing on a gray mare-called Mad Sue. Doff Williams, Smoky Jorday and Eddie Sullivan were among the upsets. Plenty upset! A bad day for the elect of the cult, thought Sande,

as he buckled on his chaps and tightened his spur-guards and belt.

His thoughts were broken in upon suddenly by the husky voice of Abe Lawton, veteran rodeo announcer, who more than once had stolen a rodeo, or made one, with his keen wit and barbed remarks relative to events and riders in the arena. Abe now drawled through the field loudspeakers:

"Coming out of chute number one, folks, that pretty boy and former world's champion, the one and only Sande Bennett of Malibu. My, my! Of all places for a cowboy to come from. Are you coming down off that high horse, Sande? Sande's riding old Sand Man folks. Maybe it's a sand storm coming out!"

Through the white-washed slats of the chute, Sande tested the cinch, studied the skinny gray brute critically. Sand Man wheezed softly as if suffering from a slight touch of asthma, his head hung within an inch of the ground and he stirred up little puffs of dust with his blowing.

Sande lowered himself into the saddle. He was cool and confident now. All other thoughts except this ride before him faded into the background of his mind. "Turn him loose!"

Sand Man plunged sideways out of the chute, nearly throwing himself in his effort to be free. He had a vicious style all his own. It wasn't orthodox, but effective enough. A weaving, lashing, pounding buck that once clear of the chute could have all been done on a patch of ground the size of a mattress.

He wasn't going anywhere but up and down, but not like a pump handle or piston. His movements were cat swift, his landings at all angles, anvil hard. Sande rolled and weaved with him, but he wasn't catching all the rhythm of that insane performance. There was ground and sky and the terrific pounding at the base of his spine; salty sweat blinded his eyes, and the pounding reached up into his brain, but Sande kept scratching and was in there every time Sand Man lashed the ground. At last through the pounding welter, as he felt blood begin to trickle from his nose, he heard faintly the whistle. A moment later he was pulled up back of a pick-up man.

The stands and skyline rocked dizzily for a moment before he got them back in place. Then the great roar from the stands was in

his ears. He hadn't heard it before, but knew now it had been going on all the time.

DINNER had been perfect. Jane Witmer was far lovelier even than he had remembered; a white flame in a golden sheath of a gown that enhanced the perfect curves of her strong young body.

"Your ride was wonderful, yet terrible, Sande. Everyone has been talking about it."

"What did you think of your first rodeo?" he asked. "Was it all you expected?"

"Thrilling—yet horrible, too," she was very serious. "It hurt me to see you bruised and shaken like that. Isn't it awful?"

"Sometimes," he answered, his pulse quickening at the concern in her voice. "It all depends on what you happen to draw. I had all I wanted this afternoon. You ride them as they come though—that's the game."

They strolled about town afterwards, danced here and there, had a cocktail or two. It was near midnight when he left her at the hotel. He had promised to take her for a horseback ride next morning.

They rode out a long shaded road heading east through the lettuce fields from the arena. It was shortly after nine, but already the heat had begun to thicken the morning air. She rode with an easy grace of familiarity, and Sande reflected she seemed to do everything she happened to be doing well. He liked that.

Riding slightly behind and to her left, Sande studied the line of her cheek and throat, noting with keen appreciation the slight flush of health under the creamy-gold of her skin; the dull glinting red gold of her hair in the morning sun.

Her talk was gay. "This is your last rodeo, I hear, Sande. Are you going to be champion again this year?"

"Depends on the breaks," Sande told her. "I thought when I left Malibu that I wanted to be champion, to retire so, but somehow it doesn't seem so important now. Meeting you has been the really important thing here at Salinas. . . . Anyway," he went on, "Steve Cawkley and Cal Kardic have me slightly shaded on points for the year. Red Garrison and Dave Billings who picked Cheyenne instead of Salinas are both way up there. We'll know more about

everything when the results come in from Cheyenne Saturday night. Anything can happen in this game."

"I'm glad you're quitting, Sande," she said impulsively.

"Why?"

"I don't know. Somehow you don't seem to fit in with the rest—I mean, you're not just beef and muscle."

Sande was interested. "What am I then?"

She smiled. "You're awfully sweet, for one thing."

"You would inspire that in anyone, Jane," he said huskily.

They had had a gallop and were back at the stables. Sande was unsaddling, Jane standing near patting Zick's silky nose, when down the dusty runway between the two lines of stalls, Cal Kardic appeared coming their way. His majestic bulk loomed up in the morning sunlight. His face straight in front of him, the California champion didn't seem to see them, though he passed within eight feet.

"Did you see that?" Jane asked incredulously when the big puncher had finally passed out of hearing. "Is he mad at us?"

"Cal's meeting his own worst fears this morning," Sande said thoughtfully. "Didn't look as if he had slept last night, either."

"What do you mean, Sande?"

"Just that he drew Son of Cain to ride this afternoon."

"The killer horse he talked about? He isn't afraid is he?"

"He is. Scared to death! I saw his face last night at the drawings when he pulled his slip and looked at it. Like a man receiving a death sentence—no hope left."

"A champion afraid to ride—that seems strange," Jane said.

"I've been that way myself," Sande admitted. "I know just what he's going through. You see Jane, Cal saw Son of Cain kill Ardy Shattuck two weeks ago, and it's been riding him ever since. He knows the horse has never been ridden, that he killed a man before he got to Ardy."

"Why doesn't he refuse to ride him then?" she asked.

"It just isn't done. Besides Cal's game enough. He'll feel better once he gets that black devil between his knees. It's thinking about it that's getting Cal."

SANDE was at his best that afternoon. He dropped from Zick's withers to the horns of a scrawny steer, snapped the band on his nose in less than ten seconds for day money; his bull ride was fair, though the first jump out of the chute had been a bad one. His score with Steve Cawkley in the team roping was good, and his swift catch and quicker tie in the calf roping pushed his score way up.

Sande's ride on Cornbelt was sweet and showy to look at, but a snap for Sande. Cornbelt was on the sloping side of show life, but he went into his act with a rising twist that brought a yell from the stands. A very spectacular, but cushioned buck, Cornbelt. Putting on his show, earning his oats, but landing carefully, as if pastern and knee at last needed protection after all the years of thumping abuse. Sande drew a perfect score.

The day's sensation came late in the afternoon when Cal Kardic came out on Son of Cain. With quiet interest Sande had watched the champion a few minutes before the ride. Cal had moved nervously about the chutes, his hands opening and closing unconsciously, his mouth a grim line; seeming lost in his own thoughts and oblivious of the men of his kind around him.

"Stewing in his own acids," thought Sande. The gate came back and they were out in the arena. The scarred black just cleared the chutes and then stayed there and went to work. Standing close Sande saw the whites of the killer's eyes as he began throwing himself about in an utterly insane fashion. Twisting, spinning, thudding madness, but Cal was sitting him tight. Then it happened. It came so quick, Sande rubbed his eyes.

Like the fall of a pistol hammer, Son of Cain threw himself backwards. Kardic made a vain attempt to get himself clear, but his right leg was partly under the cantle when the black landed with a thud that could be heard in back of the grandstand. There was a moan from the audience, Abe Lawton having left nothing unsaid concerning the killer's grisly past.

Sande, who was closer than anyone else, saw the killer turn on the fallen rider, and ran in slapping the beast across the nose with a tie rope to whip him clear of the prone body. For an instant he had a look

at the red-rimmed eyes, and it was like a cold shock of fear that passed through him. They weren't animal, nor human, but some insane obsession looked out of them. Something from the depths of the pit of hell itself—mad, unholy. Afterwards Sande felt sick inside.

They were carrying Cal out of the arena. His face was twisted in pain and a low moan escaped his lips. His right leg was broken below the knee, and there was a bloody gash across his forehead.

Before going to his room to change after the day's events, Sande stopped at the hospital. All Kardic had to say was: "I knew my number was up the minute I pulled him out of the hat last night. Do me a favor, Sande, go put a bullet between his eyes for me."

THEY had had dinner and strolled about town for a while. Sande had long since granted to himself that he was utterly in love with Jane Witmer. That elation, that sense of power he had known in her presence, hadn't lagged for an instant since their meeting in Jerry Griffith's suite of rooms. No reason for not telling her, Sande thought, as they pushed through the crowd in the Crystal Club. They had just ordered a cocktail and were about to dance.

It was so sudden—so shockingly unexpected to Sande, that it left him stunned for a time. Out of the crowd near the bar a young man of perhaps twenty-seven or eight rushed up to them.

"Jane, my beautiful!" He threw his arms around her and hugged her to him with intimate abandon. "Been looking everywhere for you. . . . Got in from L. A. about seven."

Jane's voice trembled, Sande thought. "Of all places to find you, Larry. It's good to see you, my dear—"

"Lord, you're lovely, child," the young man said.

"It's been so long, Larry. Where did you come from? What are you doing here?"

Sande's throat had tightened, his hands hung limp at his sides—he felt completely sunk. He hadn't missed the starry look that had come into Jane's face as she greeted this stranger—wide open for a moment, before she got hold of herself.

She turned to him quickly as if she had just remembered him. She was holding the other man's hand. "This is one of my oldest friends, Sande—an old sweetheart—we practically grew up together. This is Larry Cockerell, Sande Bennett."

They shook hands. "Glad to know you," said Sande stiffly.

"A friend of Jane's a friend of mine. Let's have a drink in celebration," he went on easily. "Had to fly out from Cleveland on a short notice, but I have until Monday. Naturally I made tracks for Salinas when Darbley told me where you were."

Suddenly Sande's world had turned black and dismal. One couldn't help liking Larry Cockerell. Handsome in a strong masculine way; cultured, with a flair for saying and doing the right thing at the right time. But deep inside Sande knew a sudden, poignant loss. His world was altogether different, and these two had things in common that he wasn't even remotely connected with. It wasn't hard for Sande to picture these two as belonging to each other. Less than an hour later he left them together in the lobby of the Jeffery. Earlier Jane had promised to ride with him again the following morning.

Alone in his room later, Sande knew a queer lost feeling; something he couldn't cope with. The sustained elation he had known since his arrival in Salinas was quite dissipated now.

THEY took the same dusty road leading away from the arena next morning. They rode in more or less silence, each lost in his own thoughts. Jane had confided on the way down from the hotel that she had talked nearly all night with Larry Cockerell, now she was strangely silent. Sande broke that silence finally.

"Tell me about Larry, Jane," he said.

"I've known him all my life. He's a lawyer in Cleveland."

"Are you in love with him?" he said quickly.

"Does it matter?"

"More than anything in the world to me," he answered. "You know that."

She spoke low and slowly as the horses walked close together. "Two years ago, Larry and I were engaged. I guess I was in love with him. Two weeks before we were to be married, I found out he had

been having an affair with another woman. We broke up. He went to Cleveland shortly after that to join a law firm there.

When he arrived last night, it was the first time I had seen him in two years. That's all."

"And now, Jane?"

"I don't know, Sande," she said quietly. "He says he has never changed about me," she said quietly. "Let's gallop." They raced a mile or so to the brow of a low hill and turned back. Suddenly Sande had to know where he stood.

"Did you happen to keep tonight open for me?" he asked, his lips drawn tight as he waited for her answer.

"I couldn't desert Larry. I thought the three of us could go out somewhere together. You won't mind?"

"No. Somehow I figured you wouldn't have much more time for me—"

"Why, Sande?"

"You and Larry seem to have so much for each other. I realize too, that my world isn't your world, Jane, probably never could be."

"That isn't so, Sande," she said quickly.

Suddenly Sande pushed Zick in close against the other mount. His leg brushed Jane's, and swinging his arm around her waist, Sande bent forward. Her lips came up to his naturally and for a moment clung to them. She did not draw away. He let his arm drop, regarded her upturned face intently a moment.

"Thanks," said Sande. "I feel better about you now."

"What do you mean, Sande?"

"Something I had to know."

"Tell me."

"Not now."

SATURDAY the third day of the Salinas meeting was unspectacular throughout, the favorites came through with unbroken scores—the day was ordinary. With Cal Kardic out, Sande had a nice edge over the veteran Steve Cawkley, and the rest. The finals would be in tonight from Cheyenne, and right then Sande would know what he had to beat to win this year's title.

He hurried from the arena after the wild horse race which wound up each session of the meeting. He showered, shaved and changed into street clothes, eager to join

Jane, even if Larry Cockerell had to be along. He wasn't so troubled about Larry now.

He reached the Jeffery a few minutes after six and went up to the desk. The clerk knew him, and handed over a letter. "Miss Witmer left this for you, Mr. Bennett. She checked out about an hour ago."

"Checked out?"

"Yes, sir."

Despair shaking him, Sande found a chair in the back of the lobby before he opened the envelope. The note was brief:

Dear Sande: I guess it's this way.

I'm sorry. Larry and I are driving to Los Angeles tonight. You've been grand, Sande. So long. Jane.

Hopelessness beat in his chest—throughout his whole being. He could feel it like a poison coursing through his veins. Yet beneath that was a smouldering hatred of all womankind, suddenly flaring up. He had let himself be hurt twice the same way.

Sande found a bar and had a double whiskey. It didn't help so he ordered another. He forgot all about supper. He couldn't stand the crowd then, so he was out in the street again. From curb to curb, Main Street, roped off to all traffic, was a seething mass of humanity. Laughing, screaming—drunk and sober together. It seemed insane to him just then that anyone could be happy. On the outskirts of town finally he caught hold of himself: "No use, Sande," he said aloud against the night. "Drink won't help you—nothing will help you. Let's go see what you ride tomorrow."

Headquarters was crowded. The drawing had started. Sande fell in line, and presently reached into the hat automatically, his thoughts burned through the night after that car rolling down the highway south.

"What did you draw, Sande?" brought him back.

He unfolded the slip of paper. The name stood out in capitals: SON OF CAIN.

"Son of Cain," Sande said and turned away. No one spoke as he passed out—they knew the answer to that.

"This just isn't your day, Sande," he told himself. "When they get you down they kick you. That's just about what Mr.

Son of Cain will do tomorrow, too. But he'll lay on you first."

For a flicker of a second he thought of leaving Salinas. Tonight. Now. What the hell, why go out and get fallen on. He laughed, it wasn't a pleasant laugh. What was it he'd told Jane the other morning? Oh, yes: "You ride them as they come—that's the game."

He turned back to Headquarters, he'd forgotten to get the Cheyenne finals. There they were: Red Garrison was out in front; Dave Billings second, his own name third. He compared the ratings. Even a fair showing tomorrow and the championship was his. But between rose the ugly, scarred black head of Son of Cain.

"Any other horse here, and I'd tell them to start writing out the checks in my name," he muttered. He pushed through the welter of thousands that crowded Main Street. A woman pulled at his coat hungrily, but he brushed her away.

The sound of the crowd was a continual roar as he lay in the dark of his room, though Main Street was a block away. The grief in his chest seemed rooted in the marrow of his bones. It was a dull pounding ache that parched his throat, beating against the rhythm of his heart. Sleep took him in at last.

HE knew he was the center of all eyes. He could tell by the way the crowd gave him a hand every time he came out, no matter what kind of a showing he made. The papers had made much of Son of Cain and his ride to come, Sande moved through the various events with the frictionless ease that goes with the absence of strain. He was thinking Son of Cain—doing everything else automatically, if well enough—but preparing for the moment when he would be alone in the sun and dust of the Salinas oval with that black killer horse. At last only Son of Cain stood between him and the championship, but Sande wasn't thinking of that. He was thinking of Ardy Shattuck, and that other—and of Cal Kardic lying in bed with a smashed head and leg.

The black was being saddled in the chute. Sande looked at him through the bars. His head hung low, and his patchy black coat was dusty and manure stained. He was bony and roman nosed; a reddish glitter in

his small eyes—eyes more like those of a rhino than anything remotely connected with the term "domestic animal." His ears lay back as if he had a chronic grudge against the world. He was thick at the pasterns and knees; short legged, but deep and broad through the chest and barrel.

"A salty one, if ever I see," said Steve Cawkley at his shoulder.

"We'll see," said Sande grimly.

Abe Lawton was building him up, but Sande wasn't listening. He was too deep in his grief to feel much fear—to care much. But Sande knew that would be changed when he settled in the saddle. He could forget everything then.

He was forking down on that quivering back. He felt the black's muscles bunch under him as he settled, and pushed his feet home in the stirrups. He felt his vital forces pour down into his gripping knees, and he wrapped the yakima strap around his fist once. He rocked back and forth in the saddle and said hoarsely:

"Turn him out!"

Then he was in the dismal thick of it. Cold, clear-headed, but caught in a rocking, thundering, uncontrollable hell. The killer came up almost as he hit the ground, as if on steel springs, and Sande felt a sharp pain in his neck as his head snapped savagely. With all the force of his will, Sande held on to the dim thread of consciousness in his brain as the ride went on—his senses cocked for the telltale shift of weight and muscle that would mean over backwards. His spine was thudded and pounded until the back of his head felt as if it housed a flying piston. He tasted the salty-sweet of his own blood in his mouth, but held on to that flicker of consciousness and waited for that sudden shift and the backfling. It came to him suddenly in the height of the killer's thrashing, in the endless pain and merciless buffeting, that he was making it—making the ride of his life, and that he could take everything Son of Cain had.

IT was as if it was telegraphed from the black's brain to his own. He was swinging clear, pushing the sweaty body from him as the horse went down. The ground shook with the thud of the fall, but Sande Bennett was on his feet, and in the saddle as the killer whipped up. Son of Cain came up so fast that he scrambled and fell

again, but Sande's left foot was on the ground, and as the black came up a second time, Sande was still in the saddle.

Momentarily stunned from the shock of the fall, the black recovered and went crazily on, insane—utterly mad for a second or two more, then quite suddenly he stopped. He stood shaking, his head drooping against the yakima line. Sande could feel the terrible pounding of the great beast's heart. He stepped down and walked away.

The men of his kind were pawing him, shaking his hand; telling him it was the greatest ride they'd ever seen, but he pushed past them, wiping the blood from his mouth and nose.

"The new world's champion, Sande Bennett of Malibu," he heard Abe Lawton saying through the loudspeakers, but he kept on toward his car. He would have to come back, he knew, but now he wanted to lie alone awhile in the dark of his room. He felt old and beaten and done. He climbed

into the car, was about to step on the starter, when he heard the call:

"Sande! Wait, Sande! Wait!" That was part of the whole crazy business. He heard it again and turned. Jane was running toward him along the dusty, rutted road from the grandstand. A trick of his addled brain, he thought, but he opened the door for her.

"Oh Sande, Sande." She was in his arms then. "I was so wrong—just a fool, caught in the last fading veils of a long dead romance."

"I don't get it all quite straight, Jane," he said. "Where's Larry?"

"Los Angeles, likely. I left him at Santa Barbara about two o'clock this morning. There wasn't a bus coming back here until five, so I couldn't get here until after the show started."

"You mean—"

"Your world is the only world for me, Sande, ever."

"My little punk kid," he whispered.



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Blood ties break when a man wears a star. But lawman Clint Drummond staked his clean, good name and his battered life on the faith of the Barlowe black sheep.

SIX-GUN MORTGAGE

By DON STUART

THE clock in the little jail office of Los Manitos struck six p. m.

Clint Drummond pushed the Stetson back on his blond head and ran hard

fingers along his sharp, tanned jaw. His saddle-toughened six feet showed scant effect of a forty-mile ride. But the fans of tiny wrinkles about his hazel eyes,

marks of long hours of squinting into the sun and wind from a saddle or along the sights of a rifle, became deeper. It was always his one and only sign of worry or puzzlement.

He eyed the aged marshal of Los Manitos who was staring at the wall evasively across a battered desk.

"Funny yuh never run across Shad Barlowe down here," Clint murmured, "I'd sure like to git word of him for his folks. Barlowe's my cousin."

The marshal, Andy Hart, started; then tried to recover himself. "Yore cousin? You're Shad Barlowe's cousin? Good Lord!" The last two words were to himself, inaudible to Clint who was fingering a deputy's badge pinned to his shirt, and frowning thoughtfully.

With marked deliberation, Andy bit a chew from a plug on the desk, spat carefully and rose. "Nope," he continued aloud, "I don't reckon I kin help yuh about Shad Barlowe." He picked up a rifle and walked over to the one window; looked out.

Clint frowned at his back, started to speak, then suddenly slapped the two guns strapped to his long legs.

"Guess I'll be headin' fer the Copper Queen then, Andy. Long, the sheriff, sent me down to gather in Mort Brady. I might's well git goin'."

Andy turned, shaking his head, "Mebbe this idee of yourn'll work, Clint; I dunno. Or mebbe you jist don't want to git to be as old as me. But there's the Copper Queen," he pointed across Los Manitos' one street to a brightly lighted saloon. "Brady's there. So's his gang. When you git inside, I'll cover the doors from the window here. Nobuddy'll jump you from behind." He sighed, "But I sure think yore're trying to commit suicide. Good luck fella!"

Clint grinned. "Stayin' alive jist as easy, Andy, if yuh don't try too hard."

LOOSENING the guns in his holsters he went out. As he crossed the street, he heard Brady's heavy voice laughing. He paused at the swinging doors, picked his man out in a group at the bar, and drew his guns.

The next moment he flipped open the doors and stepped inside.

"Unbuckle yore gun belt, Brady—or smoke it!"

The curt order cut through the smoky haze leaving a stunned silence in its wake. The ten or twelve men along the bar's rough surface whirled toward the doorway. Those at tables spilled cards and chips, overturned chairs.

Clint knew deputies were never popular at Los Manitos. The deputy who came to get Mort Brady from right under the guns of his own gang was asking for bullets. Several bullets. Clint was gambling on his hard-won knowledge of men; getting the jump.

And he was used to this kind of gamble. He'd been taking them all his life: gambles and bullets. He'd lost a few gambles and stopped a few bullets, but he came of a breed that's hard to discourage.

That's why when he'd been sent from the county seat to bring in Mort Brady, outlaw, killer and general hellion, he followed his usual course: jump first and play for the breaks.

Even so, he was a little surprised at the result this time.

Brady, ten feet away, his ratty black eyes glittering with surprise and hatred, was fumbling, with thick, stubby fingers at his belt buckle. His heavy guns dropped to the floor with a thud.

Clint looked over his quarry's short, chunky body in amazement. Brady's strength, coiled in his bull shoulders, was a legend along the border hardly less notorious than his nerve and swift gunplay.

From the corner of his eye, Clint glanced over the others. Their hard eyes were shifting not between himself and Brady—but between Brady and another: a tall, bulky man who took one step away from the bar and fastened his narrowed eyes on the deputy. His eyes were of the same hazel hue as Clint's. The blond hair, under the expensive pearl-gray sombrero, was the same shade. Matched almost evenly in height and weight, the resemblance was striking. But where Clint's clothes and equipment were stained and worn, the other's were almost resplendent.

Staring at the ornate stilt-heeled boots; at the tooled leather of holsters and heavily studded cartridge belt, from which two beautifully finished pearl-handled guns

were slung, Clint took one step forward, his fingers tightening about his gun-butts.

"Shad Barlowe," he breathed. "What the devil!"

For a moment their glances held. Clint grinned, started to speak. Then Barlowe turned his back indifferently, as if he were a stranger, and poured himself a drink. Brady clapped him on the shoulder familiarly.

"Look after the boys, Shad. I'm countin' on you."

Shad glanced quickly at Clint, once; smiled at Brady and tossed off his drink.

No one else moved. Perhaps it was amazement at Brady's docile shedding of his guns. The faint uncertainty in his eyes. Why didn't he speak to any others of his wolf pack? Order guns to blaze?

Sensing undercurrents in this muddy backwash of the border that for the moment he couldn't fathom, Clint gathered in the first pot and backed toward the door.

Across the street the jail door was open. Andy Hart was steadying a rifle barrel from between the bars of a window.

"Come on, Brady," Clint ordered. "We'll serve you supper in a private dining room."

Brady shambled toward him, gnawing his thick lips, his eyes glittering viciously. Barlowe remained motionless, his back to his cousin. No hand moved for a gun. No man spoke. And in the strained silence, a lawman walked out of the Copper Queen with his prisoner: a prisoner who was rated among the fastest and most vicious gun-busters in a vicious gun-busting country.

Across the street, Clint guided his man past the emotionless, old marshal, under the low arch in the wall that separated the short three-cell corridor from the office in front. The cell corridor and the office comprised all of the square one-story building. In the corridor opposite the cells, a ladder led to a trap door in the roof. There was no door in the rear and only one window in the office. The cell windows were little more than small holes high up in the wall. The 'dobe walls were thick. Clint was figuring that a man with a rifle at the office window should be able to hold a pretty fair force of men from storming the door.

7—Action Stories—October

"Somebody bin takin' the rough off you, Mort?" he asked as he locked Brady in a cell.

"Get out!" Brady rasped, fumbling for smokes he didn't have.

Clint grinned and tossed him his own along with some matches. "Careful with them matches, Mort, an' don't blow yourself up."

THE grin was gone, however, when he returned to the office. He was thinking of Shad Barlowe and his cousin's refusal to recognize him. Well, he'd been hoping to cross trails with Shad some time, but he hadn't been counting on this sort of meeting. The fans of tiny wrinkles about his eyes deepened again. There was something fishy about this! He'd have to do a little thinking.

"Andy," he said to the marshal, "suppose you git some grub an' bring back Brady's. I'll sit on the lid fer a while."

Andy Hart nodded and brought his wizened, ancient body to its feet. "Guess yore the boss, Clint. But you tell that old jackass at the county seat that I don't need no more of his sprig depeties. Say, I was chasin' Commanches when you was twenty years from bein' born!" His old, blue eyes glowed feebly and Clint felt a tinge of warm pity for the small worn-out waddie. It was tough to be shoved aside; even gently.

"I ain't orderin', Marshal," he grinned, "I was only suggestin'."

Andy bristled, "Like hell you was!" Suddenly he grinned back, "An' when I was yore age I was orderin' too—an' makin' the orders stick. S'long. Be right back."

Clint glanced after him. Yeah, it was tough for the old timers when they slowed up. His face clouded when he thought of another old timer:

A grizzled veteran of as many fights as old Andy. A grizzled old firebrand holed up in his ranch in the northwest corner of the State. Dozing his days away now, by the side of the woman who had shared his life for forty years.

Clint was thinking of his Uncle Tod and Aunt Carrie. Father and mother of Shad Barlowe. A father and mother who hadn't seen their wandering son for five years. Who wondered in their silent un-

complaining way when they would see him again. Or even hear from him.

Clint knew the high pride they had in their only son. A pride that was as fierce and unbending as the courage with which they and their kind had helped build the State of Texas. There was only one person in the world who could break that pride. And Clint had just seen him a short while before, being patted on the back by Mort Brady: Shad Barlowe.

Clint's mind went back fifteen years. He saw himself, an orphaned, lonely stripling being taken into the Barlowe home on the same basis as Shad. When Shad got a rifle, he got a rifle. The same with a saddle, boots, a Stetson from El Paso.

But more than that; he'd gotten the same fierce, proud affection as the son of the house. The same loyal belief and confidence was reposed in him as in their own boy.

Most of all he remembered the year he, was seventeen. He'd got a name for being wild. Gambling once or twice, too many drinks, and a fight or two. Shad had gone the same way but Shad liked to keep his lapses quiet. He didn't like facing his father when he'd gone too far.

That was why nobody would have known Shad had been along when Clint had got in a real jam. Nobody would have known yet had it been up to Clint.

They'd both got in the habit of dropping into a poker game that was occasionally played in the cabin of an old trapper up in the hills. The night the last game was played, Clint went broke. So did one or two others. The old trapper made quite a clean-up.

Shad and Clint rode off together. The next morning the trapper was found by the two cowboys who had been in the game the night before, with a bullet in the back of his head. His money was gone.

The cowboys told of Clint's losses. They also told of Shad's being there. Frightened, Shad had left home without seeing his father. Clint stayed. Shad had never come back. And Clint was glad he had stayed. For in the two weeks that followed he learned the depth of unflinching, blind loyalty that lay in Aunt Carrie and Uncle Tod.

Never once did they even ask if he

was guilty. He was one of their own breed; to them, incapable of robbing and killing. They gave him the same unquestioning support they would have given each other. Without that support he might have hit the trail like any other reckless rebellious kid and finished in some barroom gun-fight. Instead he stayed until a half drunken sheepherder was brought in with most of the old trapper's money still on him.

Clint never forgot the Aunt Carrie and Uncle Tod of those black two weeks. Nor did he ever forget that behind their faith and pride in him was an even greater pride and hope in Shad.

He was always ready for their questions on his trip home! Had he seen Shad? Heard of him? Always he could say no.

CLINT paused in his thinking and rolled a cigarette. A flicker of pain crossed his eyes. He could tell them yes, now. Yes, he'd finally run across Shad Barlowe. Was likely to run across him again any minute—across the sights of a gun!

He'd heard rumors about Shad. Vague tales of not very serious mischief. He'd hoped, after a long period of no news, that Shad was just on the loose like any wandering cowpoke. And now, here he was one of Mort Brady's trusted gunslammers! And Clint knew those gunslammers weren't going to stand idle long. There was something cooking. There must be. That quiet surrender didn't add up right.

Clint rose and went to the window. It was dark. Dark and quiet. Uncomfortably quiet. From over in the Copper Queen came the tinny notes of a piano. He glanced up the street. There was no one in sight except for one or two of the few remaining law-abiding men left in what was once a thriving little town. The men were walking rapidly, eyes on the ground.

"Humph," Clint grunted. "Looks like they been pistol-whipped. Well, I gotta stay here 'til mornin'. No use trying to make the railroad in the dark over roads I don't know. An' there's no train 'til heaven knows when." His brows knitted, "I'd sure like to know what's behind that peaceful play the boys pulled. I gotta

feelin' somethin's gonna bust right in my face."

As if to confirm his vague forebodings a shot echoed from the far end of the street. A shot, a scream, and the swift padding of running feet.

CLINT snatched up a rifle, slammed the door shut. With his rifle muzzle resting on the window sill he saw a man staggering toward the jail carrying another. Four men in pursuit stopped suddenly and dived through the swinging doors of the Copper Queen.

Clint whirled from the window.

The jail door burst open and two men sprawled on the floor. One lay ominously still: Andy Hart. The other rose and kicked the door shut.

"Hell's gonna pop, Clint. I held 'em as long as I could. 'Til they killed Hart. They want Brady!" The breathless speaker was Shad Barlowe.

Clint swung his rifle around. His face paled slightly under its tan. His eyes had become slits of ice. "Who downed him, Barlowe? Come clean. I don't savvy this play of yore's. Talk plain an' talk fast." This last twist of events was beginning to rasp his nerves. "Come on—an' don't try ridin' fer two brands at once!"

Barlowe shuffled uncertainly and looked at the floor. The resemblance between the two cousins was less marked now than it had been in the Copper Queen bar. Both tall, blond, hazel-eyed. But Barlowe's greater weight was more noticeable when they stood close together. His eyes were smaller and more closely set. His mouth, too, was more full and loose, marring his face with a touch of weakness, instability.

Some women would have found him handsome. The same women would have called Clint strong. Judges of men, however, would have shown slight hesitancy in picking the deputy to trust.

Finally Barlowe raised his eyes to his cousin's. They were wide and frank and, to Clint's astonishment, pleading.

"Hey, Clint—gimme a chance! I ain't no angel but I ain't helpin' to wipe out my own flesh an' blood."

Clint blinked, looked at him narrowly. "Yuh mean yuh wanta throw in with me? Then why did yuh pass me up in the Copper Queen?"

"I had to, Clint. How could I have got in here alone if they knew I was yore cousin. Come on, Clint, ain't blood thicker than water?"

For a moment Clint was tempted to laugh in his face, send him back to his killer companions. But something stopped him. Something that resolved itself into a vision of two seamed old faces that formed out of the air beside Shad Barlowe: Uncle Tod's and Aunt Carrie's.

Suppose Shad was on the level? Clint remembered again how close he himself had come to hitting the wrong trail when Uncle Tod and Aunt Carrie had backed him to the limit. Could he do any less for their son? Could he throw him out as his instincts warned him to do? And if he did, could he face those old folks again with the thought that he hadn't given Shad the same break they'd given an orphaned kid?

After all he had nothing against Shad beyond never having cottoned to him much. And Shad might be telling the truth about not being able to take a chance on speaking in the barroom.

IN the silence of the little jail office, with the wizened body of the marshal between them, and a battered clock ticking off the seconds, Clint raised his head and took another of his gambles. Gambling his prisoner, his star, and a more familiar stake, his life. He could hear the raucous laughter coming from the Copper Queen as he thrust out his hand.

"Okey, Shad," he said quietly. "Good luck to us. We'll need it."

"Yore a white man, Clint." Barlowe took his hand. For just a second they measured each other; these two who had just made a bargain. Then Barlowe glanced toward the corridor.

"What yuh gonna do about Brady if it gets too hot? Drill him?"

Clint looked at him quickly but Shad's face was expressionless. "Drill him? What for? I ain't never shot an unarmed man yet, hombre, an' I don't figger to start now. Let's put Andy on that cot in the corner."

Barlowe shrugged and obeyed. He even took particular pains to lay the body carefully. He continued to arrange it as Clint took down rifles and cartridges.

"How soon you figger the boys is comin' fer Brady?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Any time now," Barlowe replied and sauntered into the cell-corridor. Clint's back was turned for a moment. He was back almost immediately, smiling. He laid the gun he had taken from the dead marshal on the desk, which was set a foot or two from the archway that separated the cells and the office.

Clint saw him put the gun down and turned to glance out the window at the Copper Queen. As he turned, the cell door nearest the archway swung slowly open. Mort Brady, his eyes on Clint's back, took one step out. He couldn't see the glint of triumph in Barlowe's eyes.

The little clock ticking on made the only sound. Brady took another cautious step, then lunged suddenly and grabbed the marshal's gun from the desk where Barlowe had placed it.

As his fingers closed on it, an amazing thing happened.

"Clint—he's out!"

Barlowe shouted the warning. He whirled and one of his guns roared. Shrieking an oath, Brady pitched forward on his face, kicked, and lay still.

Clint spun round at the shot. Barlowe's gun covered him. He glanced from Brady's body to his cousin. "Say, Shad, how'd he get . . ." He stopped suddenly as he caught the sneering glint in Barlowe's eyes, realized what that pointing gun meant.

"Brady's been in my way," Barlowe announced easily. In his left hand he swung the cell keys he had lifted from Andy's body. "Just like you are now."

The keys jangled as he pointed to the marshal's still form. "Just like he was."

He laughed loudly, "Blood's thicker'n water, Drummond—but it ain't as thick as you are. As you said to Mort so heroic-like tonight—unbelt them guns and unbelt 'em fast! Yore easy!" He smiled, licking his loose lips.

Of all the things that were whirling around in Clint's mind at the moment, one thing was clear: with Barlowe's gun-muzzle six feet from his heart, if he reached for a gun he'd be dead before his hand even touched the butt.

But that killing of Brady was beginning to answer a lot of questions for him. A

wave of cold bitterness swept over him. It was reflected in the tight smile that tautened his mouth as he unfastened his gun belt and let it fall at his feet. In a moment he got control of his voice.

"Easy is right, Shad. Well, what's the play, you yellow rat!" Strangely the only person he could think of was Aunt Carrie. The memory of her patient ever-hopeful eyes when she spoke of her only son. It put a tone in his voice that cut like a whip.

Barlowe's face flushed. The hatred he had so carefully concealed up to now burst forth, lashing him into a fury.

"Yellow rat, huh! You lousy Sunday-school baby! I allus hated yuh. I suppose you made up good to the folks after I run away. Tellin' 'em what a naughty boy they raised. Settin' yourself fer the ranch that's comin' to me some day. Well you ain't going to be here, hombre, when I git ready to take the brand over. You bin to a lot of trouble fer nothin'!"

CLINT didn't answer him. The realization was creeping over him that there were only two finishes to this. And neither one held anything for him. If by some miracle he got Barlowe, there was Aunt Carrie and Uncle Tod to face. If Barlowe finished him. . . . The second solution was his choice at the moment.

"Walked right into it, didn't you?" Barlowe went on gloatingly. "I bin tryin' to get Brady fer weeks. Most of the boys is with me. That's why you got him so easy tonight. He didn't know who'd stand behind him. A lot of the boys was lookin' to me fer orders. Ain't yuh gonna congratulate me?"

Clint sighed wearily. "I'd be obliged if you'd stop talkin' an' do somethin', Shad. You ain't no speech-maker." He smiled that little cold smile again and began rolling a query.

Barlowe stepped back. "Ain't thinkin' of tryin' that old tobacco trick, I hope. You wasn't gonna shoot it at my eyes?" he laughed.

Then his voice went hard, viciously triumphant, "Yore in a tough jam, Drummond. When I give the word the boys is gonna bust in here and take you apart. They was afraid to foller me while Mort was alive. An' Mort's got friends left that I don't want gunnin' fer me. But

now it looks like you shot a escapin' prisoner an' I was tryin' to hold the boys off lynchin' yuh. Do yuh think mebbe the folks'll hear about what a hero I bin?"

He walked over to the window. Clint watched him, silently puffing his querly. It occurred to him that he and the querly would finish existence at about the same time.

He eyed his guns on the floor. Maybe he'd be able to snatch up one and take a few of these wolves with him. If only he could do that! Just go out with a gun barking in each hand. Instinctively his nerves tensed for a spring as he saw Barlowe getting ready to send his signal to the Copper Queen.

"S'long, Drummond—here you go." A long whistle shrilled from Barlowe's lips. He turned his back toward the archway where Brady was lying, as a crowd of shouting men issued from the saloon and started for the jail.

Clint was poised on his toes a split second before he made one desperate stab for his guns. The gang was almost to the door. Two bullets smashed the window.

Then, from behind Barlowe, came a gasping cough. A gun crashed.

Barlowe's face twisted in agonized amazement. His arms flew outward, he tottered for a moment on the balls of his feet, tried to speak. Then he crumpled forward, face down, with a hole between his shoulders.

In the archway, Brady's fist was gripped about the butt of the marshal's .45. It was still smoking and this time Brady was dead. But he had fought off death long enough to take his double-crossing segundo with him. And he had done a more efficient job than his own murderer.

Shad was through.

But his gang was still alive. The impact of their charge bulged the jail door inward. Clint snatched up his guns, rushed to shove the heavy desk forward to reinforce the door. He could sweep the approach to the jail with rifle-fire from the window.

It was just one chance.

But he slipped and went sprawling. His precious moment of grace was gone. The door groaned, smashed, ripping away from its hinges. Clint leaped through the archway. From the scant shelter of the

angle he began pumping lead from two guns into the stumbling tangle spilling into the office.

It was a murderous fire and for a moment, only a moment, it stopped the advance dead. They were beginning to slam lead back at him when he realized his guns were empty. Like a cat, he sprang for the ladder behind him, which led to the roof, scaled it and plunged through the square hole at the top. He was too late to pull the ladder after him. He snapped the heavy iron trap shut, kneeling on it to reload.

The trap was set close to the low coping of the roof. On each side of the jail a building rose a story higher. The trap beneath him began dancing with the frenzied efforts of those below to force it up.

Clint smiled grimly and held it down. How long could he hold it down?

THEN from the roof at his left a gun began to speak. Bullets tore up the graveled roof about him. Something seared his neck. A jet of fire creased his side. He fired a burst at the flashes. A man toppled forward and fell to the street.

Now, from the opposite roof, another gun went into action. The marksman was covered.

Forced off the trap, Clint crouched in the shelter of the coping. He was exposed to fire from the other roof but as yet no one had taken the place of the man he had picked off.

As he crawled backward the trap flew open. A head and shoulders appeared; disappeared with a howl of agony as he fired. The top rungs of a ladder appeared over the edge of the roof a few feet away. Clint sprang at it, shoved outward with all his strength. It toppled backward to the accompaniment of howls.

But two men had made the roof through the trapdoor. They fired. Clint whirled, pulling both triggers. He staggered as a bullet ripped his thigh. Fired again as one, then the other, pitched forward. He knew he was nearly done. More heads appeared in the opening and he emptied his guns at them.

Clint staggered back. He tripped and fell against the coping. From behind

something descended viciously, grazing the side of his head. Instinctively he threw his arms backward, grasping a pair of shoulders. He heaved. Someone had shinned up the rain pipe.

With his hands on human flesh, and getting a glimpse of a heavy brutish face twisted into a killer's snarl, Clint spent the last of his strength in a crazy fit of half-hysterical berserk rage.

The corded muscles of his arms almost snapped as he strained, jerking the big body forward. He lost his hold and staggered to his feet, swinging blindly.

A fist struck the wound across his ribs but he didn't seem to feel it. Then one of his desperate, flailing swings crunched against bone. Dimly he heard a new flurry of shots below. Shouts. Running feet. He was vaguely aware of a wild thrill at the landing of that punch, of seeing his man go down like a sack of grain. He staggered backward again, struck the coping, tottering and began slipping over the edge. Dazedly he clawed, hung suspended for a moment, went downward.

He was somehow aware that there were men waiting for him at the bottom.

What seemed like a long time later, he realized that they weren't waiting for him with bullets but that he was being carried carefully. He twisted his head, trying to squirm upright.

A tall stony-faced middle-aged man, armed with a rifle, was walking beside him. He glanced down.

"Lie still, pardner," he mumbled and looked away.

Clint thought he detected a queer uneasiness about the stranger. As if he were afraid to meet his eyes. His hearers were equally silent.

"I wonder," he murmured to himself, "if I'm cashin'? Are you boys cartin' me to boothill?" he demanded aloud.

The tall man beside him, looked down again, smiling thinly, sheepishly. "Hell, no, Drummond! We're cartin' you to bed if we got one that's good enough fer yuh. An' if we're fit to cart yuh."

"Fit to cart me?"

The man's jaw tightened. He looked straight ahead as if what he had to say

was hard but necessary. "Yeah. They's five-six of us here that Brady didn't drive out. Tonight, when we found you was cleanin' the Brady gang alone, we—we—," he swallowed hard, "we remembered we had some guts left an' tried to chip in. But 'bout all we was able to do was sweep up the pieces!"

Clint knew what it cost a man to say a thing like that. He tried to grin. "Shucks, hombre, don't be so modest. Seems like that rifle ain't cold an' I'd be surprised if them wasn't new bullet holes in your hat. I'm right proud to know you-all!"

He heard a low grateful laugh as he sank back.

"By the way, boys, there's a man named Barlowe. Don't put him in boothill. He's comin' with me." Clint's eyes closed and he winced. It wasn't his wounds. He was thinking of Uncle Tod and Aunt Carrie waiting for Shad.

* * * * *

A week later, three people stood on a knoll above the Barlowe ranch-house: a lean, bent old man, a small white-haired woman, and Clint Drummond.

Aunt Carrie's head was bowed over her crossed hands but her eyes were misty and shining even though they looked on her son's grave. Tod Barlowe's gnarled hand was resting on his nephew's hard shoulder. His eyes, too, were misty and proud.

Clint was gazing down the valley at a slowly moving herd.

"Yeah, folks, he went out like a Barlowe."

"Because he didn't kill a man," Aunt Carrie whispered. "Barlowes never was killers."

Old Tod nodded, "They never was, honey."

"An' he saved my hide," Clint finished, his eyes still on those drifting cattle. "Took a slug in the back an' saved my hide." He slipped an arm about two frail pairs of shoulders. "You'll always think of that when you come up here, won't you?"

In the sunset he led them slowly back toward the ranch-house with their pride in their clean breed intact. Border breed!



THE RED HORSEMAN OF THE RIO

By TOM J. HOPKINS

Only the five who were marked for death could tell the *tejano* what he had to know—so Bill Chaffee pounded the trail of the Border killer in a mad race to snatch his secret from the grave.

IT was about three in the morning when a gun muzzle prodded the snoring Mexican storekeeper in El Portal. He opened his sleep-blurred eyes to see a tall masked man dressed in black standing over him.

The frightened Mexican's mouth opened to yell his fear. Then the chattering teeth clicked against cold steel. The masked man had jammed the muzzle of his gun into the Mexican's mouth, effectually gagging him.

Without a word, signaling only by the ominous gun muzzle, the tall masked man made the storekeeper open his store. Inside, with the aid of a lighted candle, the mysterious figure soon located what he sought. A ghoulish chuckle came from behind the mask.

The Mexican shivered harder than ever, barely suppressing a moan of fear. Had his hands not been raised above his head, he would have crossed himself. It was too much for Bernardo's nerves, this thing. First the tall masked man—then his ominous gun—and now that chuckle as the man counted out five coffins.

Bernardo, however, was no fool. He had lived too long in that dangerous town of El Portal not to know the danger of a masked man with a pistol. Working together, rapidly, the masked man and Bernardo soon had the five coffins out on the front porch of the store.

Bernardo sent swift looks about—but the sleeping town was silent, seemingly lifeless. He looked back, hopelessly, at the masked man. The man was staring at

Bernardo. Even in the darkness, through the slits of the mask, those eyes seemed glowing, strangely alive.

Bernardo shivered. The gun was motioning him into the store again. His lips working in a panic, Bernardo obeyed. The masked man peered about the shelves for a moment, then helped himself to a small brush and a can of paint. Bernardo moistened his lips. It was red paint. The color of blood. . . .

There was something eerie, inhuman, about the way the mysterious figure moved about. From a showcase the tall man took a long-bladed knife, of the type the average Border Mexican carries hidden in his clothes, ready for a death thrust. Bernardo caught his breath as he watched.

Out onto the porch again, then. Five long black boxes of death, there, and the silent town beyond. Bernardo watched, fascinated as the man began to paint on each coffin lid. Not many strokes on each. . . . Bernardo knew what he was doing, had a strange, ominous premonition.

The masked figure was stepping back. Bernardo had a feeling that a grin was behind that mask—the grin of a death's head. But he obeyed the gesture, made with the blade of the long knife the man had taken from the showcase. The knife was pointing at one of the coffins. Bernardo stepped forward, his feet like leaden things. He dreaded the thing he was about to see, yet knew he must look.

Bernardo crouched and leaned over to read. Yes, even in the darkness he could read the name painted there. His fascinated, fear-stricken eyes followed the letters one by one:

BERNARDO

THE masked figure made a gesture. Something thudded into the coffin lid not six inches from Bernardo's face. The long knife was quivering there. Instinctively Bernardo's hand closed on the hilt. He jerked it free and whirled about. The move was the desperation of a hunted soul—cornered, facing certain death, yet ready to battle it like an animal.

Bernardo, quivering in fear, saw the tall figure whip off the mask, as he too jerked out a long knife. One look at the grinning face, and Bernardo leaped forward. He whipped the knife upward for a blow.

Bernardo knew he was leaping straight at vengeance, deserved death. Yet he leaped. . . .

EL PORTAL was a tough town. It rather gloried in the fact. Lost in low, rough mountains near the Border, dominated by a man as evil as ever walked the town was the haunt of hunted men.

Living on other people's property, death and murder for profit, that was the life of the townsmen of El Portal. Yet, accustomed to death as they were, never had the men of El Portal been jolted quite so hard as when the first early risers found the five coffins on the porch of the store.

In five minutes, five times that many men had gathered. They stood about nervously—off the porch—staring fearfully at the ominous boxes with names painted on them. Bright red names, painted against black. Red is blood and black is death. The men of El Portal shivered and crossed themselves, for all there knew the five men whose names appeared on those black boxes.

Mingling with the excited group about the store were three mounted men, who had ridden into El Portal not ten minutes earlier. Two were Mexicans, well known in town, and just the ordinary type of Border vaqueros in clothes and manners. The third of the trio was a sturdy, blond-haired American, dressed in range clothes, with two guns swinging from his thighs.

A stranger to El Portal, Bill Chaffee was in the town on a mission that he alone knew. It was, outwardly, a rather simple mission which had drawn him there. Just the asking of a question: Is Juan Garcia alive or dead? Yet that question was so important that Bill Chaffee willingly risked his life to get the answer.

Three weeks before riding into El Portal, Bill Chaffee had returned to his home town, in Arizona, after a long absence. That had been in response to an urgent message from his younger sister. Two years before, during Chaffee's absence, Belle had married a Mexican of good family whom her brother had never seen. Within six months this new brother-in-law, Juan Garcia, had been mixed up in a bank robbery and fled the country. Proof had followed swiftly that several times before he had run afoul of the law.

Belle, deeply in love with her brother's best friend, now, felt she could not marry until certain that Juan Garcia was dead. Rumors had come of Garcia's death—yet proof was lacking.

It was like Bill Chaffee to tackle the dangerous job of trying to learn the truth, rather than to allow Belle's fiancé to risk his life and perhaps end her chances for happiness after so much sorrow. He had taken the trail alone.

Three weeks of risky prowling about the dangerous Border haunts of wanted men had given Chaffee the names of five men, former associates of Juan Garcia. They alone, it was said, could tell him whether Garcia still lived.

He had been warned by the men who had taken his gold in exchange for the information that in riding to El Portal he was riding to probable death. Bill Chaffee had laughed softly—and ridden to El Portal.

The crowd, muttering and surging about, was forcing Chaffee slowly to the front. Separated from the two Mexicans with whom he had ridden into town, he was slowly forced up to the very front rank where his eyes rested on the grim row of coffins.

His eyes, darkening suddenly, shifted swiftly from box to box, reading each name on the lid. There was little change in Bill Chaffee's expression, though his lips tightened slightly. His heart thumped heavily for a moment, then he stepped back through the muttering crowd.

At the far edge of the crowd he paused, brooding, fists clenching slightly. The names of the five men who could tell him of Juan Garcia were the very names painted on those coffins. And there was no mistaking the meaning—those five men were listed for death.

CHAFFEE caught a sudden muttering of fear from among the thickening group:

"El Tigre!" men whispered to each other. "El Tigre is coming!"

All men there knew and feared El Tigre and his power. Powerful, dangerous, his quick-flaring temper made him a risky man to be near when enraged. Men knew that, and wondered what El Tigre would do when he read those names painted on the

coffins and brazenly displayed in the very heart of his stronghold.

Chaffee turned with the rest. Coming down the street was a tall, slender fellow dressed in gay and showy clothing. His leather jacket and breeches were slashed with scarlet silk and heavy with silver ornaments. His white shirt and sash were of heavy Chinese silk of the finest make. His tall sombrero, ornamented with silver, glistened in the bright sunlight. A dandy, a fop—*charro* to the greatest degree, that was El Tigre.

On either side of the swift-walking leader paced a gunman. Hard-eyed, cruel-faced, cold-blooded killers, those two men who guarded El Tigre. Yet a person who picked them as being more dangerous than the man they guarded . . . well, such a person would have been mistaken.

El Tigre's face was blazing with ill-suppressed fury as the full meaning of the thing burst on him. His angry black eyes shifted from closed coffin to closed coffin, reading each name. And with each name his anger grew.

Suddenly he leaped forward, taking the steps onto the porch with a wild leap. His hands shot out and jerked the lid from the nearest coffin. It was empty, and he grinned—though there was nothing of joy in that grimace.

"Who?" demanded El Tigre. "Who did this?"

A sudden sputter of explanations came as men told of finding the coffins displayed there when they had first stirred, long after daylight. El Tigre nodded coldly. His first blaze of fury seemed past.

He was thinking swiftly now. This was a direct challenge to him and his power—flung squarely in his teeth before all men. If he took it seriously, made too much of the thing, his men would take it the same way. El Tigre laughed.

"Some fool!" he said sneeringly. "Some weak jester! Come, we will play this fool's own game for him. We will see if the jester dares to try and fill these empty things—when they rest in my own saloon."

Laughing now, taking it as El Tigre had known they would, a dozen men surged up onto the porch and grabbed at the coffins. Suddenly a pig-like squeal of terror broke from several lips. It was drowned in a sputtering cry of dismayed fear. Some

had found empty coffins waiting their lifting hands—but some were stepping back from a well-filled box. There, as the lid slid off at their touch, all men could see the dead body of Bernardo—a knife driven through his heart.

“COME, señor,” said a soft voice in Chaffee’s ear. “This is no time to meet El Tigre.”

Chaffee grinned at the half-frightened look on the face of Cota, one of the two Mexicans with whom he had ridden into town. Pock-marked, mustached, with a pop-eyed look of surprise on his dark face continually, Cota moved off toward their horses.

Chaffee walked beside Pablo, the third of the trio. He was a boyish, good-looking young Mexican, in a feminine way almost, so soft-eyed and gentle mannered was he. Yet Chaffee had seen him fighting, and was not deceived. Pablo, like most of his kind, was a devil when aroused.

Cota led the way to his hut, on the outskirts of town. The three men put up their horses in the adjacent corral. After eating, Cota left for El Tigre’s saloon, hoping to pick a good time for taking his new-found friend, Chaffee, into the leader’s presence. It was about noon when he returned. He nodded for Chaffee and Pablo to come along with him.

When they entered the big saloon where El Tigre had his headquarters, Chaffee stared about with a good deal of curiosity. It was evidently part of an old hacienda, about which the town had grown. Through small, open doors, Chaffee could see a big, well-kept patio from which many rooms opened. The saloon was crowded with Mexicans, talking, peering about curiously.

Against the rear wall of the place were the four empty coffins. The fifth had been used to bury the first victim—Bernardo. As Cota led the way past the coffins, Chaffee read the four names swiftly:

Duran, Dominguez, Morales, Valle. Each the name of a man Chaffee wanted to question. . . . Each marked for death by some mysterious killer.

Inside a small room, Chaffee faced El Tigre and his two gunmen guards, smiling coolly. Cota and Pablo waited, silent. Chaffee knew his danger, facing El Tigre

and four others at a time when the leader of that crew was so thoroughly aroused. Yet it had to be done.

“These men,” El Tigre said coldly, pointing to Cota and Pablo, “tell me that you aided them in a fight last night. Why?”

Chaffee told his prearranged story quite smoothly. He had been in trouble and was fleeing the law. Quite by chance—the only truth in the story—he had stumbled on the two Mexicans battling the bunch of cowboys from whom they had stolen a few horses. He had aided them. Why not? He shrugged, implying that he would aid anyone—not on the side of the law.

El Tigre, studying the cool-eyed, wary American, read the marks of the gunfighter with ease. There was no mistaking that calm confidence in his own ability to take care of himself. Chaffee showed it even in the presence of El Tigre and his men. The fellow was an experienced gunman, and that El Tigre read clearly in his face and manner. He was right, but what the man did not guess was that Bill Chaffee’s guns specialized in the furtherance of law and order.

After a brief moment of thought, El Tigre said:

“I do not take men into my confidence until they have proved their worth, Señor Americano. If you wish to stay around here—to share in our gains—you will bring me the ears of this Coffin Filler.”

EL TIGRE spat out the last two words viciously. Chaffee nodded slowly. His brain was working fast, fully appreciating the hardness of the task offered him, and its dangers—for many reasons. Not the least of them being that if he failed the mysterious Filler would unquestionably slaughter the very men Chaffee had risked his life to find.

His task had been made doubly hard by the episode of the coffins—yet it was there to be done, and that as swiftly as possible. It was a chance, too, that could be turned to his own advantage.

“I’ll tackle the job,” he said grimly. “Who is the man that labeled those coffins?”

El Tigre sputtered a string of venomous curses, mingled with the emphatic statement that if he knew he would have the killer’s ears without asking aid. Chaffee

nodded. The job was tougher than he had first anticipated. A sudden, brightening thought came. . . . Here was his chance to find out where his wanted men lived.

"Well, if you don't know the Coffin Filler," he said, "it'll help me to know the fellows he aims to fill them with."

El Tigre nodded and without hesitation gave the information Chaffee wanted. One of the men, Dominguez, lived in a hut not two hundred yards from the saloon. Morales and Valle were at the time living on a small ranch about ten miles down the stream from town, the only ranch in that vicinity.

"Thanks," said Chaffee, concealing his elation at locating the men so easily. "But where does the other one live—this fellow, Duran?"

"Fool!" El Tigre barked at him, taking a sudden step forward. "I am Duran!"

Chaffee's grin was easy, to cover his embarrassment at the surprising turn. So, El Tigre himself, in addition to being one of the men he sought, was an intended victim of the mysterious Coffin Filler! But now was no time to take a chance on asking the infuriated El Tigre any questions about Juan Garcia.

"Reckon you can take care of yourself," said Chaffee, with a quick hitch at his gun belts. "I'll take care of the Coffin Filler."

WITH a cool nod, Chaffee left the room. He walked straight through the saloon and headed for the hut occupied by Dominguez. One look into its dim interior was all he needed. Dominguez, a snoring huddle in the bunk, was thoroughly drunk and beyond questioning for the time being, at least.

Chaffee, frowning, sat in the doorway and smoked. An hour passed, two. It was growing dark. There was plenty of time to think and puzzle about the thing, and Chaffee put his mind to work.

Who the mysterious Coffin Filler, as El Tigre had named him, might be, meant nothing to Chaffee. The mysterious fellow could kill off all the bandits and desperadoes in Mexico—and Chaffee would wish him luck. But killing the men Chaffee depended on for the information he wanted, to aid his sister, was something to be prevented.

Chaffee set his jaws grimly. His sis-

ter's happiness was of the first importance to him. She wanted to be certain that Juan Garcia was dead, and if any man interfered with Bill Chaffee in getting that information, it would be just too bad.

By sunset Bill Chaffee was thoroughly sick of sitting listening to the drunken snores of Dominguez, yet he dared not leave him. Dominguez offered the best chance for questioning, for Morales and Valle might already be dead, on that isolated ranch.

El Tigre, also, was nearby, and might offer a faint chance to get the desired information. Chaffee rose, with the half-formed idea of going to talk to El Tigre. It was at that moment turning his eyes toward El Tigre's headquarters, that Chaffee saw a rider swing out of the wide rear gate of the enclosed corrals at the rear of the saloon building.

The rider, ambling along slowly, came straight over to Chaffee at the door of the hut. Leaning out of his saddle, grinning a white-toothed, friendly smile, the man said:

"*Hombrecito*, you are to go to El Tigre. He has news of this Coffin Filler for you."

The man, a stranger to Chaffee, slid gracefully out of his saddle and lounged at the doorway. Chaffee hesitated, for despite his desire to learn what he could of the Coffin Filler, the chance to question Dominguez was uppermost in his thoughts. And the drunken Dominguez was already beginning to stir. Chaffee hated to leave at the moment, yet knew he could not question Dominguez with the newcomer there. It seemed best to go to El Tigre and return later.

With a nod of assent, Chaffee turned and walked off toward the saloon. A casual glance back showed the flaring of a newly lighted lamp. Chaffee walked on through the willows of the river-bed for another hundred feet. Then a sudden noise brought him around swiftly. He was just in time to see the man who had promised to watch Dominguez—spurring his horse off into the darkness.

BILL CHAFFEE made the distance back to the hut in faster time than he ever had run before. But even so, he knew he was too late. In the dimly lighted hut he found the truth. Dominguez was

dead. Clenched in his fist was his gun, but driven through his heart was a long knife.

Chaffee's angry eyes caught a glint of white paper. He picked it up. In rudely scrawled words he read:

"Dominguez—for the coffin!"

Chaffee whirled and raced out of the room. Far down the river-bed he could hear the last clattering of racing hoofs. The Coffin Filler was riding toward the isolated ranch where Morales and Valle were living. Riding to kill them, Chaffee was sure.

Still running, Chaffee was thinking swiftly. To go to El Tigre, now, might bring the evil bandit leader's fury down on his own head. That would mean the end of his chances to aid his sister. Morales and Valle offered the best chance to get the knowledge he wanted and the best chance of getting away safely with that knowledge—due to their isolated position.

And the Coffin Filler, mysterious, tricky killer that he was, already was riding away into the darkness, headed in the very direction that would take him to Morales and Valle.

Chaffee turned sharply to the left, still running. At top speed he made his way toward the hut where he had left his horse. Neither Cota nor Pablo was in sight when he reached the corral.

Two minutes later Chaffee was in the saddle, riding at top speed through the darkness, on the trail of the Coffin Filler. His face was grim, set, determined. His sister's happiness depended, he felt certain, on his reaching the isolated ranch and preventing the Coffin Filler from killing them.

On he thundered through the darkness, down the river trail. Ahead of him, somewhere in the silent darkness, rode another grim-faced man as stubbornly determined to kill as Chaffee was to prevent him from killing.

For nearly two hours Chaffee rode at top speed, without seeing or hearing the mysterious Coffin Filler. Then two hundred yards from a small, lighted hut, he pulled up and stared about. El Tigre had told him Morales and Valle were at the first ranch down the river.

The lighted hut ahead was the first sign of life Chaffee had seen in his wild ride.

This, then, must be the place. It was a silent place. What did that silence mean? And the Coffin Filler, where was he?

IN answer came a sudden, wild scream of I fear. It was drowned in the quick spattering of gun fire. Chaffee spurred his horse forward, forgetful of danger to himself.

The hut went suddenly silent after the quick spattering of shots. The racing horse was jerked to a halt, spraying gravel ahead of him. Shots might follow, instantly, but Chaffee leaped from the saddle and ran into the hut—guns drawn and ready.

There, sprawled in the center of the small adobe hut, were the limp figures of two men. Other than those two figures. Chaffee saw nothing. No one else was in sight. Not a sign of the tall, mysterious killer. The man had disappeared instantly, his work done. Then, as Chaffee glared about, one of the two Mexicans stirred and moaned.

Forgetting lurking danger, death that might come to him from a hidden killer, Chaffee ran to the man's side. There was a chance he could question him and get the information. One question, one answer, would be enough.

Even as Chaffee reached the man and leaned over, he saw a sudden, convulsive jerk—and the man lay still. Dead, Chaffee realized instantly. One glance at the other limp huddle was enough. Telling its own story was a dark hole in the man's forehead.

"Well, *hombrecito!*"

The mocking voice came from a doorway at the rear. Chaffee wheeled, his guns rising for a quick shot. But he did not fire. The tall, slender fellow dressed in dark vaquero clothing was smiling at him, in all friendliness.

Without any attempt to touch his guns or protect himself, the Coffin Filler said quietly:

"You are not one of El Tigre's men, *hombrecito!* What are you doing here?"

He spoke in far better Spanish than the ordinary Border Mexican, Chaffee knew instantly. He studied the man for a moment before answering. The Coffin Filler was obviously a man of good family, well-educated; wise, also, and not easily fooled.

There was something quite likable about the man's handsome face, with its half-mocking expression of amusement. Something that told Chaffee the Coffin Filler could not be driven—but might be led. It was a thought Chaffee was quick to act upon.

"I've nothing against you," he said quietly, lowering his guns. "Except that you're killing off some men who know something I've got to find out."

The Coffin Filler's face looked a little grim, then, as he said:

"Nothing can stop me from killing those men."

Chaffee tried hard to make his smile friendly.

"You sure are making a good job of it," he said. "You've got them all but one. I don't want to stop you from killing him, because from what I've heard of El Tigre and his tricks, he sure deserves death. But I've got to talk to him first, and if you'll listen a moment, I'll tell you why."

Talking rapidly, as the Coffin Filler stood silent, Chaffee told of his errand down there and what it meant to his sister and his best friend.

"I never saw this fellow Garcia that she married when I was away," he ended. "We heard first he was dead, then heard he wasn't. As far as I can find out, El Tigre is the only man left around here to tell me the truth. That's why I'm asking you to let him live until I can question him."

"And, *hombrecito*, if I refuse?" The question came slowly.

"We shoot it out, right here."

CHAFFEE'S ultimatum was laid down flatly. He hoped to avoid a battle with the Coffin Filler, and that not through fear of the outcome. He knew that if he were wounded or killed there would be little chance of his sister learning the truth. But fight it out, then and there, he was ready to do if the Coffin Filler did not agree.

The Coffin Filler's face had changed noticeably at hearing Chaffee's story. There was a look of admiration for Chaffee and his cool courage, grim determination. A brief moment of thought, then the Coffin Filler smiled and began to talk:

"Me, I like you. I like the way you talk—straight. If you shoot as straight

..." He shrugged, still smiling in his friendly way. "But understand this, *hombrecito*. Once you mention the name of Juan Garcia to that devil, El Tigre, you will die."

Chaffee started to speak, but the slim hand of the Coffin Filler came up for silence. He was not through:

"I have heard of this Juan Garcia—not a bad man in his way. El Tigre hated him for the same reason that he hates me. He wronged me deeply, *hombrecito*. Tricked me, used me, and then tried to kill me. But me, I am still here. And I do not forget who ruined me."

He stepped forward.

"A bargain with you, *hombrecito*. Help me to take these dead men to El Tigre. Help me to kill Tigre. Then I will take you to a man who knows the real truth about Juan Garcia. Knows something that El Tigre only guesses."

A moment of thought convinced Chaffee. There was no question but that El Tigre, aroused to fury by the repeated killing of his men, would be a thoroughly dangerous man to try and question. Especially about a man he hated.

The Coffin Filler's scheme offered two chances of getting through alive with the news for his sister—against the one scant chance of getting out alive from fights with both the Coffin Filler and El Tigre's men. The two chances being in the two men themselves, one of them being almost certain to come through a fight with El Tigre alive and able to get the needed information to Chaffee's sister.

"I'm with you," said Chaffee. "But you've got to promise, in case I'm killed, to get the news I want and send it to my sister."

"Agreed, *hombrecito*!" The Coffin Filler laughed softly and clapped his hands. "You are surely a man after my own heart."

The two men then picked up the dead bodies of Morales and Valle and carried them out. Extra horses were brought from the corral and the bodies placed on them. Then, each leading a horse with a dead man for a rider, Chaffee and the Coffin Filler set out on the last part of their errand. They were on their way to El Portal—the saloon of El Tigre—where three coffins waited.

IT was early in the morning when a chattering, fear-stricken man awakened El Tigre and his two gunmen guards. Rubbing his aching head, the frightened man sputtered a story that brought the bandit leader cursing to his feet. The Coffin Filler!

"I was watching those empty boxes of death," the man sputtered hurriedly. "Something hit me—darkness came. Then when I woke up—" He crossed himself hurriedly—one coffin still had the lid covering it. The other two—the lids were down, the coffins *filled*."

"You—you!"

El Tigre ended in a blaze of fury. One heavy blow knocked the guard down. A vicious kick landed on the fellow's head, knocking him unconscious.

Then, swearing in a rage well-mixed with fear, El Tigre ran swiftly out of the room, his guards following him. In the patio he yelled once. Two men came piling out of another room, guns drawn, eyes blinking with sleep, the last of El Tigre's personal guard.

Storming and stamping his furious way, El Tigre led the race into the dimly lighted saloon, where the three coffins were lined against the wall. His own was still as it had been, lid covering it, with his name painted in big red letters—Duran! But on either side were the two others—both filled, Morales and Vallee, grim witnesses to the vengeance of the Coffin Filler.

"Shoot that pig of a guard who let the man in here with those dead!" El Tigre shouted, storming back and forth in his fury. "Rouse the whole town! That man must be here. We must kill him before—before . . ."

El Tigre's jaw dropped. His tongue went silent. His four gunmen stood frozen, statues of superstitious fear. The lid of the central coffin, bearing El Tigre's name, was moving. No question about it—the lid was moving out, falling forward. Suddenly it crashed to the ground with a sound which made the five men leap backward in fright. As it fell the five pair of frightened eyes saw the coffin contained a man—not dead, but very much alive.

Before any of the five could make a move, out popped the man from the coffin, with drawn guns.

"I was warming it for you, Duran!"

The Coffin Filler laughed when he said that, and it was not a pleasant laugh. He had lived over this scene of revenge for many months. Now it was reality. The end was here.

He laughed again as he saw Chaffee pop up from his hiding-place behind the bar. They had schemed well together, and the scheme had worked out to perfection. They waited now for the inevitable first move from the men they were to try to kill.

SUDDENLY it came, that deadly roaring of six-guns. The saloon blazed with flaring gun flashes. Smoke billowed and eddied. Chaffee was throwing lead in a deadly hail toward the four guards, leaving El Tigre for the man who sought him, the Coffin Filler himself.

It was the sort of blazing hell of death that seemed to last for hours—yet is over in swiftly fleeting seconds. Just a blazing roll of rapid gun-fire from many irons—dying out quickly to silence. Five men were down, four motionless, the fifth—El Tigre himself—writhing in his death struggle.

Chaffee vaulted the bar and ran toward the Coffin Filler. The tall man was grinning delightedly, but swaying, groping for a support.

"You hurt?"

Chaffee flung the question anxiously. The Coffin Filler drew himself up. He did not answer.

Outside, sleepy shouts, cries, were sounding. The town had been aroused by the sudden shooting. Men would be coming soon to investigate. Little time to waste.

A quick heave from both men and the notorious El Tigre was in his last resting place—the coffin which had his name on it. A grin of elation swept the look of pain from the Coffin Filler's face. His job was ended.

Out through the rear door plunged the two men, at top speed. The Coffin Filler was staggering a little, but refused aid. Onto their waiting horses then. Off through the darkness. In their wake there was desultory shooting by the startled townsmen. Then, only darkness. They were safely away.

THE Coffin Filler led the way through the night. The first glow of daylight was tingeing the peaks when he drew up his horse.

"Help me down," he said through gray-ing lips.

Chaffee felt a sudden surge of sorrow. The man, he knew, was dying. They had been together only a few hours. Yet death had trailed them hard in that time and made them friends.

Chaffee tried to make the man as comfortable as he could, there on the hard ground. But the Coffin Filler only laughed gently and brushed his ministering hands aside.

"Don't waste time on me," he said slowly. "I'm dying—and glad for two reasons. One is . . . that while I have been a bad man at times . . . I have killed

the man responsible for most of my troubles—El Tigre."

The Coffin Filler went silent for a moment. Chaffee leaned over him.

"You haven't forgotten?"

A soft smile was his answer.

"I knew you . . . the moment I saw you," said the Coffin Filler. "From your picture. Go back, Bill Chaffee. Tell your sister . . . my second reason—"

His voice died out, rose again:

"Tell her—love—glad for her happiness . . . Juan Garcia is dead—"

Chaffee stared down at the dying man, stunned by what he had heard.

"You—you're Juan Garcia?"

There was no answer. Juan Garcia—the Coffin Filler—had spoken the truth with his last breath. He would not speak again. He was dead.



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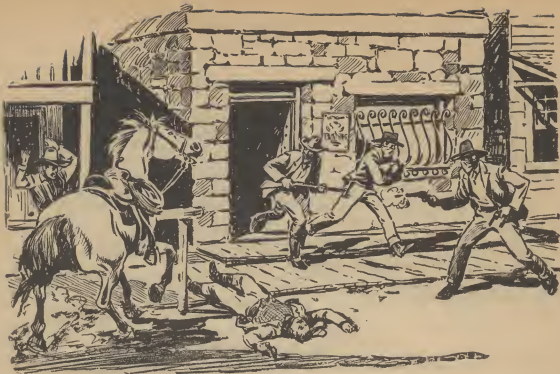
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BOOTHILL ROUND-UP

By JAMES P. OLSEN

The Rattler! Hard-case rannies once walked soft at mention of that slip-holstered devil's name. Now men called Dan Mono coward! For the Rattler was dead—his fatal fangs pulled by a cool-eyed range queen.

A MAN stumbled through the wing doors of the Long Tom Saloon and collapsed on the walk. A shotgun boomed, a rifle chattered and a young cow-puncher sagged grotesquely to the ground. Two riderless horses raced down the lead-swept street and out of Three Forks town.

Dan Mono, whom men called The Rattler, crouched in the doorway of the barber shop. A little wisp of smoke trailed from the muzzle of the six-gun in his hand. His face was white, his mouth a lipless gash drawn in across it.

A giant of a man with a fiery red beard and red-rimmed, maddened eyes crouched behind a watering trough just up the street from Mono. He gripped a gun in each hand, judged distance to a horse tied at the hitchrack, and tensed his muscles.

"Come an' get 'er, red devil," Mono called in a barking, dry voice. "You started 'er. Come on an' finish it."

Red Gorner yelled, "Hadn't been for you!" and leaped up. He ran sideways, his guns slanted around toward the barbershop. They slobbered smoke, thundering with a steady, pounding sound.

Dan Mono had left the doorway. He was a slender, elusive target as he leaped into the street. The big gun in his white right hand bucked, leveled, bucked again. His movements sinuous as those of a rattler, he came on toward the red-bearded man. Gorner spun suddenly, hit the street, rolled, and sat up, bracing his palms against the ground.

He opened his mouth. No sound passed his suddenly red and dripping lips. Red Gorner shook his head and doubled forward, pressing his cheek into the dirt. His eyes rolled, set in his head. . . .

A tall man with the bitterness of defeat warping his pallid features limped out of the Long Tom, his hands high in the air.



"I'm done," he bawled. "Damn you, Ring, call that Rattler off. I figured Red Gorner was the gunman to get him. But now I'm whipped."

A squat man, Ring came around the corner of the blacksmith shop, a shotgun in the crook of his arm. One of his riders crawled off the flat roof of the Busy Bee Cafe, and still another, mopping a bullet cut cheek, came from behind a rainbarrel beside the Boston Store.

Bill Summert said, "I'll cut that fence and open the waterhole again, Ring. Bigod, it ain't been worth it. Not in what we've lost in property and stock and men."

"That's right," Ring said. He licked his lips and stared at the young puncher lying dead beneath the hitching rail. "I'm sorry about Pinky, there," he muttered. "I dunno which one of our bunch might've got him. I—Hell, Summert, we can't feel too damn kindly toward each other. But I need a drink."

Bill Summert nodded. He said, "This's hell. Here comes Pinky's maw and sister out of the store."

THE Summert-Ring feud over line fence and waterhole was over. Just as life was over for the too-reckless young puncher—barely more than a button—who'd left his bloody prints on the hitching rail. Just as it was over for the gunman,

Red Gorner, who'd often bragged what he'd do to The Rattler if ever they saw each other through the smoke.

Dan Mono, The Rattler, stepped back against the barber shop and thrust fresh, fat, greasy forty-five cartridges into his gun. He'd hired to Art Ring because Ring had seemed most in the right about the water and the fence, and because Red Gorner had signed on Summert's side. It was all impersonal to Dan Mono, as gunfighting always had been to him.

For the first time in his explosive career, The Rattler was to sample the full and bitter dregs of a gunfight's aftermath.

A girl, still in the long-legged, awkward stage, her pigtailed flying, ran to the body of the kid, Pinky, and dropped on her knees. She gathered his head onto her lap, and kneeled there calling his name over and over until her voice beat shrilly over Three Forks and sickened those who heard.

A gray-haired woman stumbled up, grasped the hitching rail, jerked her hand away and stared at it in a numbed, unbelieving manner. "His blood," she choked, her voice sobbing with sorrow that runs too deeply, too wretchedly for the relief of tears. "My boy's blood."

She stared around, her eyes glassy, opened wide, shaking her head as though to deny such a thing could be. Art Ring and Bill Summert bit their lips and crumpled their hats in their hands as they

shuffled their boots and stared at their toes.

Her seamed, careworn face was turned toward Dan Mono now. She swayed, while the dead boy's sister's shrill pleas for him to move, to speak just one word, were reduced to a terrible, wrenching sobbing it seemed must tear her apart.

It was The Rattler who leaped, caught her as she fell. It was The Rattler who ran with her toward the doctor's. She was old, and she was little. She was like The Rattler's mother perhaps would have been had she lived. The mother he remembered so dimly, now; who'd sung lullabys as she rocked him, his head against her breast.

"Oh, my God!" Dan Mono choked, putting her into the doctor's arms.

"You call on Him *now!*" the doctor snarled, shutting him out of the room.

Dan Mono stood outside and watched women drag the boy's sister away. He watched men come with planks and blankets and carry three still figures into the hardware store.

"It wasn't my bullet that cut him down," Dan Mono said. His excuse to himself allowed him no relief from the ache that wrung his heart, or the memories that refused to be put out of his mind.

Dan Mono, The Rattler, stumbled a little as he went into the Long Tom. He seemed uncertain, a man who stands back and looks at himself and finds a stranger, a character for whom one'self can find no excuse, nothing admirable.

True, he always tried to be on the right side; always gave a man his warning, his full chance. But still Dan Mono could see The Rattler only as a gunfighter, a man who left grief and desolation in his wake; a man growing older, more despised and feared, more bloodthirsty. The longing to face others through swirling smoke grew on a man; the high excitement of taunting Time and courting Death became like liquor to a drunkard, cards to a gambler.

Dan Mono had his drink alone and in silence, as did others in the saloon. Art Ring came in after awhile. He looked sick and inconsolable. "I'll have your money in a bit," he told Dan Mono, then moved away from him.

They wouldn't want The Rattler around Three Forks now. Saddened, wiser men wished to be rid of the sight of him. Well, why not, he said bitterly to himself. His

own mirrored reflection of himself didn't please him.

Dan Mono went out and walked aimlessly past the little church at the end of the street. He sat down alone in a little gully, a man trying to awaken from a long, bad dream. He could picture the funeral they'd have for Pinky. A few words in the church, a grave on the knoll beyond.

Hot suns, cold winds, rains of Spring and snows of Winter would level the mound; but never the memory in a mother's heart, the ache attending it. Nor could Time give Pinky's sister back the brother she adored.

Dan Mono wept unashamedly, as only strong men may weep. He rose and stumbled blindly out of this retreat. It was Dan Mono who mounted his horse and set its head due north. Plain Dan Mono.

He'd buried The Rattler in the gully beyond the church.

DAN MONO'S restless spirit goaded him ever northward until the day he drew rein and sat looking down at the town of Dally below. The timbered slopes around the little cow town were dotted with log cabins. Smoke curled lazily from chimneys and left a sweet, somehow nostalgic tang in the cooling, autumn air. Beyond Dally's short business street, the opened rangeland sloped toward the Broken Smoke Mountains, dim, empurpled shapes jagged in the distant haze.

Dan Mono could not explain why he felt so at peace with the world, when he'd been so driven, so dissatisfied before. He just knew the sense of satisfaction, of reaching home at long last steeped him. He pressed forward down the road that wound into the town.

He left his horse in a feedbarn where an aged hostler eyed him a little worriedly. Then, coming closer, the old man perceived Dan Mono packed no gun. His smile was genuine, his cracked voice sincere. "Welcome to Dally," he told Dan Mono.

Mono liked the looks of this town, with the two neat rows of buildings of thick logs, its outward face one of peace and cheer and hominess. He stopped on the walk to roll a cigarette, staring absently at the small building before him, until he realized it was closed.

He mounted the steps and stood on the

porch, his nose against the dusty window curtained half way up.

It seemed that instinct had brought Mono here, and Fate had willed it so he now knew what he wished to do, the place he was destined to occupy. He walked on down the street. A man in cowpuncher's garb came out of the Elkhorn Bar and angled across the street, toward horses tied in front of the Bon Ton Millinery and Baking Shop.

He squinted at Mono briefly, the while latching on the belt and the holstered gun he'd had hung over his saddle horn. Other men had, Mono now noticed, done the same. It looked like Dally had a law against gun toting. Which it did. It also looked like men had reason to want their weapons where they could lay hands on them quickly . . . Which they did.

"That place up the street?" The puncher settled his pistol against his leg. "It's held by John Free, at the bank there on the corner. I reckon you'd better ask him anything you want to know about the place."

"I will. An' thanks."

"Sall right." The rider reined into the street. "And say!" he said, as though unable to contain himself. "I hope to hell you open up there, and make it stick."

Mono frowned, looked up and down the street. The Elkhorn seemed to be the only saloon hereabouts. That puncher hadn't seemed any too happy, come to think of it, when he'd come out of the place. Maybe the Elkhorn needed a little honest competition, Mono mused and went on toward the Bank of Dally.

HE stood before the lone teller's cage in the little lobby, then, snatching off his travel-stained hat and crushing it against his chest. He stared without pretense, unable to direct his attention elsewhere than to the girl who came up on the other side of the wicket.

She was small and slender with honey colored hair framing her soft, oval face. She couldn't have been called beautiful—her nose was turned up a bit too much and her mouth was generous. Yet Dan Mono could find nothing about her that wasn't perfection. He glowed inwardly and something seemed to stick in his throat; he saw her own throat redden, then her cheeks, and she smiled and said, "Hello—you."

She said it naturally, and she returned his scrutiny with interest of her own.

"I'm sorry I stared," he muttered, showing that he wasn't. "I'd like to see John Free."

He watched the girl's fine, free way of walking when she left the wicket and went into a little office in the rear. She came out, pointed to a second door outside the counter.

"Dad's in there," she said.

Mono went into the little office and stood before a tall man who regarded him sharply with eyes that were shrewd yet kindly beneath gray brows. Mono could see no family resemblance between father and daughter.

"Mister Free," Mono introduced himself, "I'm Dan Mono. I just rode into Dally, lookin' for a place to light. I got the feelin'—" he placed a hand on his breast—"I've found it."

Free nodded slowly, as though he understood.

"I've got a little money, Free," Mono went on. "I want to invest it here."

Free frowned, shaking his head. "You haven't packed a gun against those overalls," he said, nodding significantly at Mono's right leg.

"I'm a man of peace," Mono assured him.

"You have a way about you that suggests you know how to handle yourself. I can't explain it," Free continued.

Dan Mono rubbed his palms against his thighs. "Once," he admitted, "you'd seen the mark of gun wearin' on my levis. I rode away from that."

"I see. Well, Mono, if I sold you a bit of range or cattle, you'd be riding out of peace. I was leading up to that. We're having trouble on the Broken Smoke range. Grass hog trouble. One man is bringing in more cattle than he should; he's crowding the range and overgrazing it."

"That's bad. But I don't want to go to ranchin'—though I thank you for your honesty in warnin' me, believin' that I did. There's a place up the street, sort of across from the Elkhorn. I was curious an' looked inside. I saw a little counter an' a fireplace—"

"Oh, that," John Free cut in. "It belonged to a man and his wife. Name of Royce. They had a little restaurant there. Then Royce started putting in drinks."

"They didn't make no money?" Mono inquired.

"They might have," Free said sharply, a grim line creasing around his mouth. "Except that stray bullets got the habit of hitting the place, and Royce found he had a lot of enemies with fists and gunbutts too willing to mark his face and head. He had his wife to think of. So they pulled out.

"You see, Mono, the man who owns the Elkhorn is the same man who is hogging Broken Smoke range. If you stay around you'll meet him. Anse Argus is his name. But I don't guess you'll stay around."

"If I could come to terms with you, maybe get a li'l backin' if I need it, I'd like to take over that place, Free. I'll make a real bar out of that counter; I'll put in tables an' chairs. I'd like to provide a poker game an' drinks for peaceful men. Men like you, for instance. See what I mean?"

Free nodded. "I do. It would be a good thing for Dally, too."

John Free drummed his fingers on his chair arm. "I can't do very much toward backing you, Mono," he said. "I'm trying to keep this bank together and help the ranchers who're fighting with their backs against the wall. But—Mary."

The girl came in. "My stepdaughter, Mary," John Free introduced. "Mary, Mr. Mono is going to open the old Royce place. Make out the papers for him to sign."

"You don't look like a saloon keeper," Mary Free told Mono.

John Free smiled and explained Mono's idea. Dan Mono seemed to sense the girl stiffening against him. "There'll be trouble," she said, her expression darkening. She left the room.

"Mary's real father was killed in a gun-battle," John Free said, staring out the window. "I married Mary's mother two years later, and tried to make things right for them. But Mary's mother never got over the shock of seeing her husband shot down."

"It's somethin' a woman don't forget," Mono mumbled. "For that matter, neither does a man forget gun trouble, once he realizes just what it means."

Mono shifted uncertainly. "I might have trouble with this Argus," he blurted. "But it won't be shootin' trouble, I can promise that."

ANSE ARGUS was a big man with dark hair, heavy jowls and the eyes of a man who looks upon the world as something to grab for himself and to hell with the other man. He spent little time on the range or in his cow camps. He paid men—mostly hard, salty, gun-handly men—to run that end of things.

He was in the Elkhorn when Dan Mono came in next day.

Mono presented a small figure as he stood facing Argus, who leaned on his bar, twirling a gold watchchain around his thick forefinger.

"We're goin' to be neighbors in business," Mono said.

"I've heard you think so," Argus answered, his voice harsh, his manner unfriendly. "I hear you've sent for a load of liquor and some tables and chairs, over at Terminal City. Maybe I'll be able to take the stuff off your hands—at my price."

"I'm not sellin'," Mono assured him. His eyes glittered as his temper rose. He could feel the muscles jerking in his shoulders, and a tingling, tense feeling running in his right hand and arm. It was the old urge to draw a gun coming back on him, and because Anse Argus caused this urge that Dan Mono had taught himself to hate and fear, Mono hated Argus.

"There ain't a price," Mono said in a voice that shook. Anse Argus thought fear of himself caused that quavering. "I'm goin' into business, aimin' to be peaceful an' right," Mono explained.

"I said you just think you do!" Argus snarled. "Get out of here, you fool. Get out of Dally."

He thrust out his thick left hand and grabbed Mono by the right shoulder, his fingers digging deep. Mono winced, and then exploded when his temper broke its bounds. His right fist smashed against Argus' nose. The big man took a backward step, his flabby lips parted, his little eyes almost hidden behind narrowed lids.

Men along the bar, the bartender behind it stood rooted in their tracks. Argus thrust out his tongue and tasted the salty warmth of his own blood trickling from his swelling nose.

"I'll kill you for that!" he roared.

Mono bent his knees and Argus' fists flailed where Mono's head had been. Mono buried his left fist to the wrist in Argus'

stomach, cracked his right against the big man's ear. Argus sucked in his breath with a hissing "Ahhhhffutt!" swore viciously and charged.

A wild blow connected with Mono's forehead and knocked him flat. He skidded, his shoulder blades making a track in the sawdust, and slammed to a stop against the wall. He rolled and leaped flashingly aside as Argus tried to put the boots to him.

Backing, shaking his head, Mono cut Argus' mouth, drove hard knuckles against his left eye, backed toward the bar and slid under and aside as Argus charged again.

HE was like that, still moving down the bar, when the light forces of all Creation seemed to explode inside his skull. He went to his knees, bracing his palms on a floor that seemed to rock like a saddle screwed to the hurricane deck of an outlaw bronc. Blood ran from his lacerated scalp, and whiskey from the bottle the bartender had broken over his head, drenched him.

Anse Argus kicked him, drove him forward, sliding on his face. There was little resistance in Mono when Argus seized him by the scruff, the seat of the pants, staggered to the door with him and hurled Mono over the walk into the road.

"Damn you, I'll kill you!" Argus raged.

Mono crawled to his feet, stumbled a few steps, tripped and fell. He realized, in a throbbing, semi-conscious manner, he was down again; he knew, dimly, what went on around him but couldn't seem to do much about it.

He saw a gaunt man with a drooping mustache on his face and a deputy sheriff's badge on his jacket bending above him. The lawman seemed very worried, muchly concerned. He heard John Free's voice, then Mary's.

"Argus—" John Free began.

"I want none of your preaching, banker," Argus snarled. "You backed this fool. Maybe he's a gunman. Maybe he'd better be. He came into my place and started this. He'd damned well better be able to finish it."

"If this Mono started it, Free," the deputy began apologetically, "he got no more than he asked for."

"Never mind," Free told Ed Dale, the deputy. "You just keep straddling the fence, Dale. Just play it safe." His voice was tinged with fine scorn.

Mono set his teeth against wave upon wave of blinding pain and sat up. He could feel Mary Fee's arm around him, helping him to rise. She gave him strength, helped him control himself as he showed Argus his bloody, whiskey-stung face.

Argus stepped back. Mary Free saw the deadening, wild set that marked Mono's expression, and she mumbled, "No Dan Mono. No!" as she and John Free took him between them and walked him away.

Mary and John Free waited for him while the Dally doctor took stitches in Mono's scalp and bandaged his head. Gently but firmly, they insisted on Mono going home with them. John Free brought in drinks when Mono was seated in the living room of the Free home that stood on a timbered eminence above the town.

"You'll go after Argus with a gun?" John Free inquired, not looking squarely at Mono. "It was written all over you there in the street. That you want to kill him, I mean."

Mono shuddered. "That's what I'm afraid of!" he croaked miserably. "I did want to grab a gun and shoot Argus. An' I swore I'd never shoot a man."

Dan Mono held up his right hand and stared at it as though both fascinated and afraid. He sat like that while he told them of Three Forks, and of Pinky and his mother and sister. He told them of his vow that The Rattler was to remain forever buried back at Three Forks, in the past.

"I'd rather lose this hand than to use a gun in it again," Mono swore. "Another killin', no matter the cause, an' there I'd be: a man who broke his word to hisself. An'," he almost moaned, "I'm afraid of what it'd do. If I can't whip the gun urge now, how'd I ever beat it if I busted loose again?"

He looked at John Free, and Free slowly, puzzled, shook his head. Mono looked at Mary. There were tears in her eyes.

"I hate violence!" she cried. "It took my father, killed my mother."

John Free moved over to her, put his arm around her shoulders. He worried his

lips between his teeth, frowning, sensing a oneness between Mary and Dan Mono. It had happened suddenly, and a bad thing it was likely to be for them all. But it had happened—and there it was.

"I'm in a blind canyon," John Free groaned. "I don't know what to tell you." He hesitated, looked from Mary to Mono, then left them alone.

"You won't leave," Mary said.

"A man can't run from himself," he answered.

"If you stay, it will mean violence. It will mean there's but one way, one trail left for you, Dan Mono."

"Maybe," he muttered without much hope, "this'll work itself out all right." He looked straight at her and she returned his stare.

They were drawn to each other, and each knew there'd be no speaking of it until Dan Mono's string was run out.

There was nothing else to be said. He walked to the door, put his hat on carefully and left the house, returning to the little living quarters in the rear of the place he figured on naming "Dan's Inn."

He dragged his warsack from under the cot and took from it the filled cartridge belt, the worn holster, the time-and-use polished gun he had not weighted around his waist since he'd bidden good-bye to The Rattler.

He hung the gun on a nail in the wall and sat down to stare at it, through a mist that seemed to assume the form of Mary Free's face. He raised his right hand, moved his fingers, let the hand fall back in his lap.

"I wonder," he groaned between set teeth, "how long I'll be able to whip The Rattler?"

IT was cold, with a slaty sky threatening snow, the day Dan Mono opened Dan's Inn. It had been a week of tiring, back-breaking work for him: unpacking his liquor stock and glassware, remodeling his bar, getting in his tables and chairs. Mary Free had insisted on cleaning the place, making new curtains to cover the lower half of the front window. It was a brave, heartening gesture; a prayer for peace and permanence.

Anse Argus had ridden out of Dally the day after their fight, following his range

crew as they brought in another herd of cattle that would crowd the range, and drive hard-pressed small outfits back to parts of the range when they'd face starvation once the country was locked in Winter's grip.

A few men of business in Dally drifted in that first day. A few riders stopped by, glad they didn't have to patronize the place run by a man who was strangling everyone. His boots polished, a dark mail-order suit of clothes, on, Dan Mono greeted his customers. He was proud and, forgetting Argus for the time being, he was happy.

It was a good place he had here. A fire in the open fireplace sent out a pleasant warmth and crackling. The bartender was a stove-up old cowpuncher whom all the men knew.

"It'll be a damn nice place to come an' play a friendly game, drink an' talk things over," one rancher, Whitey Boyd, allowed.

"Mebbe," Bill Jason, the bartender agreed, looking down at the pick handle he'd stowed away beneath the bar. "Mebbe it'll be, if we ain't crowded too hard."

Boyd voiced a doubt that rested in the minds of many men. "It's doubtful there'll be much trouble, since it's hard to crowd a man who won't fight back."

"I ain't so sure Dan won't fight back," Bill Jason brought the conversation to a close.

Anse Argus returned to Dally next day, bringing two of his men along. One, Whip Flint, was a granite-faced devil who was badly wanted by the Canadian Government. The second, Gar Prague, was thick necked, with a knife scar running from hairline to the point of his jaw.

They went into the Elkhorn while Argus drifted on to the bank, then came back up the street when he learned John Free was in Dan Mono's place.

ARGUS stalked in, a huge figure in a bearskin coat, his muskrat cap, earflaps tied up, perched atop his head.

He stared around, lips curling, sneering openly at the men at the little bar, at the tables.

"Cozy!" he snorted. "And business is good."

Mono stepped away from the fireplace. "It's somethin' the town can use. There's

business enough around here for both of us," he said.

"Like hell there is!" Argus snarled. He spun toward John Free, who sat at a table with the rancher, Boyd.

"Just as there isn't enough range for a bunch of two-bit cowmen to clutter up," he rapped.

Boyd's face got wintery. A low word from Free pulled him back when he'd have gotten up.

"Free, I understand you're lending money to Boyd and a few others out there," Argus grunted. "What are you trying to do? You aim to try and buck me?"

"I'm running my business for the best interest of this country," Free said stiffly. "I'm getting money from Terminal City for my bank. That money, Argus, will go to hiring men enough to hold Boyd's and the other's cattle on the proper range for the winter. It will buy winter feed for them, so they'll get through the winter and be able to show a profit—strength, I might say—next Spring."

"I'll show you strength!" roared Argus. He had a special, meaning stare for Dan Mono as he stamped out.

John Free and the others drifted out into the growing dusk, then, heading for home and suppers and seats beside their fires. Suddenly six-guns made full-throated thunder in the cold night outside. Lead crashed through the front window, smashing bottles, glasses, the mirror on the back bar.

Bill Jason came up from behind the bar, the pick handle swinging in his hand. He aimed at the hanging lamp above the bar, smashed it, plunged the place into darkness. "Damn!"

Dan Mono crouched in the darkness and heard Jason swear again.

"They got me. Busted a couple ribs, feels like," Jason called.

Mono got to his feet and fumbled in the dark. He found and lighted a bracket lamp on the wall. John Free and others, drawn by the sound of gunfire, came running back. Ed Dale, the deputy, joined them.

"You never saw nobody. There's no proof," said Ed Dale when Mono explained as best he could. "Maybe it was Flint and Prague—"

"But you wouldn't swear to it, would you?"

Prague and Flint stepped toward them along the path of light coming through the windows of the Elkhorn. They'd shed their guns, but Flint, staring at Dan Mono, invited, "If I was anything near a man, and figured somebody had wrecked my place and nicked my barkeep while I was hiding on the floor, damned if I wouldn't get a gun and go after them."

He jerked his head at Prague and said, "Come on. Let's get back to the Elkhorn, where the air ain't so strong smelled up with rabbit stink."

One by one, then, men walked away. A few of them went over to the Elkhorn to have a drink, preferring to patronize a man they hated rather than one who hugged the floor, saw his place wrecked, his bartender shot and said nothing back to the gunmen who taunted him.

Only John Free remained after the others had gone. He heard Dan Mono groan, heard the whistling of his breath. He knew the battle Mono was having with himself.

"It's no good," John Free said, "trying to go on like this. There'll be no use buying new stock, new mirror, of going ahead. I'm willing to write off what I've backed you for, Dan. Maybe it would be better—for you and Mary both—if you went away."

"I don't—know!" Dan Mono croaked. He turned and went inside.

MORNING found him hollow-eyed, still undecided, nailing boards over the front window to keep out an icy wind that howled across the range as daylight grew. There was "weather" making up.

Daily stirred, rose to the new day. Men, then, as they bent into the wind that slapped the town, paused to read the crudely formed letters Dan Mono had painted on the boards over the front of his place: "Open for biz."

They read, then went on to the Elkhorn for their drinks.

Mary came to Mono in the afternoon. He stood behind his bullet-scarred bar and stared at her. She saw the heavy six-gun holstered low against his right leg.

"No!" she sobbed. "Dan, it's no use. You'd never be sure of yourself, nor could

I be sure of you. Put away your gun. Go away from Dally—"

"Run again," he cut in bitterly. "Run from The Rattler, an' there'll be no gettin' away from him. It's no use."

He was talking to himself, Mary's wretched sob as she turned and fled ringing in his ears.

The day dragged to a close and brought no lessening of the wind, increasing the threat of storm. Dan Mono sat alone beside a little fire; he drank until, throwing his bottle smashing against the fireplace, he knew the liquor would have no affect on him.

Unshaven, hollow-eyed, he saw another day begin. He knew, as that day wore on, that he was through. Nobody came to his place; Argus wouldn't have to bother any more. Dan Mono was a rabbit, a coyote skulking in his wrecked den as far as most men were concerned.

"Run from The Rattler, an' despise myself an' lose Mary. Be The Rattler, an' still despise myself, an' lose her," Mono groaned. "If only there was some way!"

Almost as though answering his plea, a man yelled outside, another answered. Mono went to the door and opened it a bit. It had commenced to snow, the flakes driving in a blinding slant before the wind.

A little knot of men shoved out of the Elkhorn, mounted their horses, rode fifty yards and flung themselves out of the saddle before the bank. He heard somebody shout: "They shot John Free and cleaned out the bank! This country's ruined!"

MEN shoved around inside the bank. The smell of burnt gunpowder was still acrid in the air. They paid little attention to Dan Mono as he shouldered through. The doctor knelt above John Free, and Mary was on her knees on the other side of him. She turned her tearful eyes up, looked at Mono, looked down at Free again.

"I found him here when I came back from lunch," Mary sobbed to Ed Dale.

The doctor closed his kit. "Shot twice. I expect they left him for dead. It'll be a miracle if he lives the day out."

John Free muttered. Dan Mono looked across Mary's bowed head to the open door of the bank vault.

"They got all the money John Free'd

got in for the ranchers," Dale mumbled stupidly, as though unable to believe what had happened.

"They?" Mono asked sharply. Ed Dale blinked at him as though seeing him for the first time.

"Two masked men. Maybe Flint and Prague," Dale muttered. "Free managed to say they was masked, but figured to the size and such as those two."

"And I say that's a lie!" Anse Argus snarled, pushing into the bank.

He reached to thrust Dan Mono out of his way. Something in Mono's manner made Argus pause. Argus noticed the gun Mono wore, and did not misread the hungry look on the smaller man's face.

"How you know it's a lie?" Mono demanded in a clipped voice.

"They been gone out of town since before noon."

"I know that ain't so," a puncher spoke up. "I saw Flint an' Prague's horses in the lot back of the Elkhorn when I come in town not much more'n three-quarters of an hour ago."

Argus stepped back. "You can't prove Flint and Prague had a thing to do with it," he snapped.

"If I ever find them," Dale muttered, "I'll sure ask them plenty of questions."

"If you ever do?" Mono squawked. "Why in hell ain't you after them right now? Why's ever'body standin' here with their tails down, when John Free lays there shot, an' the money that's all that'll save the ranchers is gone?"

Dale waved a mittened hand toward the window. "Nobody could find nobody in that snow. It'll be worse out in the Broken Smokes. Hell, this is making up almost a blizzard. A man couldn't never make it up in those mountains."

"He sure couldn't," Argus agreed. Mono whirled on him.

"You're sure of that, ain't you?" he rasped. "Maybe that's what you figured? An' maybe you figured partly right an' partly wrong."

"What the devil you mean by that?" Argus roared.

"I'll talk to you when I get back," Dan Mono spat. He leaped toward Argus who lunged out to block Mono's way. Argus grabbed Mono's right coatsleeve with his left hand and sped his right hand under

his own coat. Mono wrenched away as the sleeve and the shirt and underwear sleeves beneath it ripped.

Mono's right hand rose, fell and the six-gun in it slammed down on Argus' head. Mono's set face, his blazing eyes, the pistol in his hand served to send men bolting aside and cleared the way to the door.

"Ever see a rabbit turn rattler?" Mono snarled, pausing briefly in the doorway.

"Dan, Dan come back!" he heard Mary cry as he turned and plunged on out into the storm-swept street and ran swiftly toward the livery stable to get his horse.

HE rode north from Dally, then, directly into the teeth of the storm. He cut strips of his torn shirtsleeve and bound the torn coatsleeve around his right arm to keep out the bitter cold. He lost sight of Dally before he'd gone fifty yards.

The wind found his body and the cold seemed to fairly burn. Snow plastered Mono and his horse. He bent his head to it and kept to the road. Crazy, no doubt, to think of finding two men in all of this. Crazy to think he could stick it out himself.

Yet it was better than sticking back in Dally with men's scorn far sharper than the wind's icy blast. It was better to be trying, to be moving. Mono felt the old tingle in his wrist and gunhand. He raised his head and faced squarely into the storm. His bitter laugh was as harsh as the elements and rang out thinly and defiantly.

Plunging on, The Rattler rode again.

He picked up a trail where two men had stopped in the shelter of a cutbank, killed a bottle of whiskey, tossed the bottle away and ridden on. The thought of a drink of whiskey to warm his numb body was a misery to Mono, until he remembered what whiskey does to a man when he bucks a storm.

"They'll be nice an' warm for a while, an' then the fire'll die out of them an' they'll drink again," Mono told himself. "In a li'l' while less, next time, they'll need another drink, an' each one after will warm them a li'l' less. Until they fall out of their saddles, damn them, an' freeze to death."

He was in the foothills of the Broken Smoke Mountains now, and slipped from the saddle, holding onto his horse's tail, running until he thought his lungs would

burst to take the numbness from his feet and legs.

Wind howled down from the broken peaks and crevices above him, cried and moaned and screamed defiance of mankind and lashed the stunted timber into unwilling obeisance. It was getting dark when, stumbling along, tugging at the bridle as he forced his flagging mount angling across a shale slide that was whipped by the storm's full force, Mono found another emptied quart whiskey bottle in the lee of a boulder that had fallen and rolled from a shelf high above. He was still on the trail.

He fought his way to a narrow, shelving bench where a few runty, twisted trees and the rising break of a rock shoulder offered shelter of a sort. It seemed hours that he crawled on hands and knees, seeking what dead branches, snow-covered windfall wood there was. The flame, when he finally got one going, flickered and whipped against the rock and gave out but little heat.

He fed it throughout a night that seemed endless in its cold and snow and shrieking, storm-filled darkness, walking, sometimes trotting back and forth on the narrow bench.

Stiff, moving on swollen feet, he went on upward as gray light spread over a country violent and miserable. A lifting of the snow curtain before a strong, straight pull in the wind showed Mono the gap against the sky far ahead of him. It was blotted out, and he was descending toward a trenchlike, timberless park between two hogbacks.

Dan Mono shivered as he mounted and put his horse into a drift, aiming for the gap he'd seen. The horse floundered belly deep in the piled snow here. Mono was forced to quit the saddle and wade and crawl, dragging, tugging at his bridle reins.

Spent, he gained the crest of the next hogback and fell flat. He lay with his head buried in his arms, icy air knifing through his torn right sleeve and slicing into his arm. He fought himself, sat up, pounded his mittened hands against his chest, until he could feel the blood tingling in them again.

Kneeling so, he faced the drive of the snow, trying to see ahead. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes and looked again. Not two hundred yards ahead, two horses

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stood exhausted, heads down, rumps to the gale. Two men stood, braced against each other, shaking their fists toward the mountain gap beyond. Then the snow blotted them from Dan Mono's sight.

He guessed what had happened: the trail through the Broken Smokes was closed. As Anse Argus must have known it would surely be. Whip Flint and Gar Prague, their horses spent, were trapped in here to die.

Mono laughed until his eyes streamed tears that glued his lashes together as they half froze on his face. He laughed as he pushed back his coat, took off his right mitten and drew his .45 from the holster. He was laughing because he was done in and more than half frozen; because it occurred to him to wonder if a frozen rattler still has poison in its fangs.

He vised the arched hammer of the six-gun back under his thumb, heedless of the burn of the icy metal. Stumbling and uncertain, he bucked his way toward Flint and Prague.

DAN MONO was almost on top of Flint and Prague before they saw him. Flint stood and stared at Mono with his mouth open. Prague made a slow, stiff motion that was perhaps meant to be a draw. Mono crouched, his gun thrust ahead of him, his elbow braced in against his ribs.

He was a tough looking man, with his cheeks blackening from frostbite, his nose peeling, his eyes sunken and bloodshot and with several days' growth of whiskers on his face.

His voice was scratchy, biting like a file. "Get them paws up, high . . . Turn around . . . turn around, damn you . . ."

He tossed away their guns, hobbled over and took their rifles and hurled them into the snow. "Get goin'," he snarled. "Back toward Dally. Lead your horses until they're able to pack you again."

"You damn fool," Prague grunted. "We'll never make it to Dally."

"You'll make 'er. An' they'll lock you up, an' later you'll look through bars the rest of your life—or a noose—for killin' John Free."

"We never meant to—" Flint began.

"Shut up!" Prague yapped at Flint.

Then added: "Aw, it don't make no difference. We'll never live through this. Anse Argus, huddem him, said we could get through up here. Hell, he knowed better!"

"Reckon that means Argus' got part of the money? Stop."

He stopped and looped his horse's reins over his arm, waved his gun and commanded, "Keep movin'. An' one wrong move, I'll have to tie you. You know what chance you'd have, tied an' awkward as you'd be. . . . About that money, now?"

"We tailed by, left the most of it with Argus and come on. We've got some in our saddlebags. Argus was to meet us the other side the mountains, later, and give us some more."

"See how crazy you are?" Mono mocked, urging them across the face of a slide. "Argus knew you'd freeze up here, an' nobody would be able to hold that killin' an' holdup against him. Well!"

"You wait. Well get Argus—" Flint began.

"Left you to die," Mono laughed. Prague, who'd been staggering, got his teeth into his anger and drove himself ahead.

Night overtook them before they were down low enough to gain shelter in the heavier timber of the lower hills. It had stopped snowing. Mono regretted that, for when the snow ceased the cold increased.

He stood with his back to a lightning riven tree and snarled at Flint and Prague, cursed them, goaded them by reminding them how Argus had sent them out to die. "While he took the money an' hunkers back, smokin' his seegars, drinkin' his likker, his feet to the fire," Mono bawled at them.

So he drove them to gathering wood and building a fire of wet, tough wood. There was very little heat gained, but there was light. Mono adjusted his saddle away from the fire and made Flint and Prague sit close, so he could watch them every second. They sat with their heads close together, whispering, now and again casting furtive glances his direction.

He knew what they were whispering, thinking of. They were getting down the mountains, toward Dally. Their horses would be able to carry them a ways, come

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morning. They could leave Mono up here—dead, of course. Then, they'd likely slip into Dally and settle with Argus, then slip out, and folks would think them lost in the mountains. They'd have all winter in which to put this country thousands of miles away from them.

"Keep your backs to me," Mono warned hoarsely. Flint scowled before he faced the little fire once more. Prague snapped a quick glance at the gun in Mono's hand. Not once had it failed to cover them, Mono's elbow braced against his ribs, the hammer back.

Mono fished in his pocket with his left hand and got flakes of tobacco; he rubbed the tobacco to his eyes to sting them wide open, and keep himself awake. He got up and stamped and moved around a little, then sat back on his saddle again.

SLEEP. God, what he wouldn't give for just a moment's sleep! Two nights at the Inn; this the second sleepless night up here—how long had been since he had slept, or felt warmth, or had a drink of scalding—how good the word sounded!—black coffee.

Mono caught himself swaying far forward and jerked his eyes open. Flint and Prague had been watching him. They looked away quickly.

Mono looked at their backs. A grin, sort of dazed and numbed and frozen, impressed itself on Mono's swollen, cracked lips. He shifted until his back was braced against his saddle. He reached with his left hand and fumbled with his torn right sleeve. . . .

Throughout that night, when Flint and Prague looked around, they could see Dan Mono was watching them, covering them with a cocked pistol. He was vague in the edge of the darkness beyond the fire, his hat pulled low. But that cocked six-gun was a weapon they didn't want to go against.

Drab, freezing came the new day. Flint and Prague had dozed. Mono had opened his eyes, managed to get to his feet and stumble over toward his horse. How he mounted, after many bad falls, was more than he ever knew. His wheezy voice snapped his prisoners to attention.

Flint fell when he first put weight on

his numbed feet. Prague helped him up, and they supported each other as they stumbled into a walk until feeling, sharp and agonizing, came back into their feet and legs. They began to whine, and Mono was glad. Pitying themselves, they'd pay less attention to the terrible state he, Dan Mono, was in.

He saw them mount, then made them go ahead of him. The hours unreeled in a world of cold, of snowdrifts, of mourning wind. They ran into snow squalls, out of them. And every time Flint and Prague looked back, Mono was right at their backs, a cocked pistol in his hand.

"My horse is in better shape, packin' lighter. Don't try an' cut 'er an' run for it," Mono warned them as they came to the lower range. "An' don't forget I'm coverin' you *all* the time."

"I'll never forget it," Flint wailed, his nerves crumbling.

Prague bowed his head as though to the inevitable.

THAT afternoon, with the short day drawing to a close, Dally was like a city filled with the dead. Snow was drifted high along the sidewalks, banked on the north slopes of roofs, deep in the deserted street. Wind picked up a layer of the white stuff from the top of Dna's Inn and swirled it, like a phantom writhing in agony, toward the three hunched figures that rode stumbling, ridden-out horses up at the head of the street.

A town in despair was Dally. A town whose people must bow to Anse Argus while hating him, because the bank was broke and so then were they.

A man rubbed the fog from a spot on the inside of the harness and saddle maker's window and stared gloomily out. He jammed his nose flat against the pane, profanely exclaimed: "It is! It's Dan Mono, an' he's got Flint an' Prague herdin' ahead."

He grabbed his coat and plunged outside to be the first to spread the news. His voice rose, wild with hope and excitement.

Doors creaked open, heads thrust out. The deserted street swarmed with men. Here and there a woman ran, and Mary Free, in the bank when the hue and cry was raised, seemed to run faster than anyone.



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The deputy, Ed Dale, came belting out of the Elkhorn, cap's earflaps flopping up and down. Mono coughed a command to halt and looked at Dale. Struck Mono, now, as sort of funny. Dale looked like a hound dog with galloping ears as he ran into the street.

Mono's expression didn't change. His face was too frost-bitten and stiff, maybe. He saw Argus walk out of the Elkhorn. Argus had his right hand under his coat.

"Dale, there's your rotten huckleberries," Dan Mono coughed again. "You find some of the bank's money in their saddle pockets. They admitted killin'—"

"What sort of talk's this?" Argus barked. Folks cleared a little space between Argus and Mono's horse. "John Free isn't dead. The doctor says he'll get well." Argus lowered his brows at Flint and Prague.

"They ain't no use. They shot Free while you was in your saloon so folks would see you all the time, Argus," Mono mumbled. He looked down, saw Mary Free and tried to smile. It wasn't a pleasant face—but a tortured one—he presented. He went on:

"You sent them toward the Broken Smoke back door, Argus, an' figured them to freeze. Frozen rannies don't blab, do they?"

"This is insane talk," Argus choked.

"Like hell she is!" cried Prague. "It's the truth. We'll swear to it in any court—and thank our luck it won't be murder we're tried for. Argus, you're in this as deep as us—"

Anse Argus shuffled back a step and his right hand whipped from under his coat. Day's dying light touched the blued steel of his heavy pistol, and then the gun roared and was clouded out in its own smoke. Prague had thrown himself from the saddle. Argus missed. He fell back another step, and his gun lifted as Mono turned in the saddle, facing a little toward Argus.

Again the bellow of Argus' six-gun throbbed in men's ears.

The bullet struck Dan Mono's right arm just above the elbow. The arm jerked and Mono grabbed his saddlehorn with his left hand to prevent falling from his hull. Though that arm swerved in at an odd angle now, it still crooked against Mono's ribs and held his gun cocked and leveled!

Argus yelled a curse and was lining down for another shot when Ed Dale's gun commenced to thunder . . . lead caught Argus in the chest . . . the side . . . the throat . . .

Mono saw that much. The frozen, snow-quilted street whirled up to meet him, then, and he heard Mary Free cry his name. He didn't know about them pulling Anse Argus' coat-tail over Argus' face, nor of the doctor coming to him and kneeling, while Dale complained, "I don't understand. He had the drop and never—"

"Drop, hell!" the doctor broke in, an awed tone to his voice. "This man brought those two in, saved this range, paved the way for Argus' downfall with his hand frozen around his gun, and his arm frozen in position so he'd always be covering his prisoners."

A reverent silence hushed the folks standing there. It was Mary Free who broke it, sobbing, "Doctor, he'll get well!"

"If I have to die to save him," the doctor swore. "Only— Well, Mary, he's bound to lose that arm. It's frozen solid and bullet smashed."

"Doctor," Mary Free murmured low, "something tells me that Dan Mono won't mind—losing that arm."

YOU can't ride in and then ride out of Dally today without a dozen proud citizens or ranchers insist on taking you to Dan's Inn and showing you the big pistol hanging above the fireplace.

That, they'll tell you, is the gun Dan Mono held when he froze his hand and arm, the time he saved this range. Saved it, and caused Anse Argus' octopus possession to end. And never fired a single shot! Nerve, huh? You huddem right.

Mary, if you were invited up to meet her and the two kids, could—but wouldn't—tell you why her husband is happier without that right arm. That right arm was The Rattler's fangs. Pulled, The Rattler was dead and never could return.

A thing that even Mary Mono doesn't know: That night, watching Flint and Prague, Dan Mono had rolled up his torn right sleeve, and had killed The Rattler deliberately!

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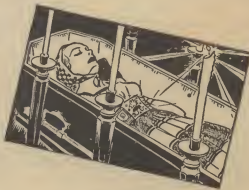


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